



## SET TO MUSIC

*By the same Author :*

A Sprite at School  
Cousins at Greycroft  
Ponies at Westways  
The Muddles of Monica  
Sandra Takes Command  
The Ballet School Mystery  
Film Stars at Riverlea  
Schoolgirl Reporter  
Three Cheers for Penny  
Kay of Kingfishers

# SET TO MUSIC

*A Junior Novel*

by

CONSTANCE M. WHITE

HUTCHINSON & CO. (Publishers) LTD  
HUTCHINSON HOUSE  
LONDON, W.1

*Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) Ltd.*  
*London   Melbourne   Sydney   Auckland*  
*Bombay   Cape Town   New York   Toronto*

*Printed in Great Britain*  
*by The Anchor Press, Ltd.,*  
*Tiptree, Essex*

To  
OLWEN  
in appreciation







## CONTENTS

| CHAPTER                     | PAGE |
|-----------------------------|------|
| I. LINDA                    | 9    |
| II. MANDY                   | 21   |
| III. THE NEW ORCHESTRA      | 32   |
| IV. PARTY PIECE             | 45   |
| V. ANXIETIES                | 58   |
| VI. ON HER OWN              | 69   |
| VII. BACK AGAIN             | 81   |
| VIII. MARTIN TAKES A HAND   | 92   |
| IX. DEADLOCK                | 102  |
| X. THE CONCERT              | 112  |
| XI. CHRISTMAS               | 124  |
| XII. WINTER SPORT           | 138  |
| XIII. FRIENDS AND RELATIONS | 148  |
| XIV. IT'S NOT TOO LATE!     | 160  |
| XV. TESTING TIME            | 173  |
| XVI. MANDY AGAIN            | 182  |
| XVII. PLAY ON . . .         | 191  |





## CHAPTER ONE

# LINDA

"Come on upstairs, Sally. We'd better hurry. Mummy says tea is just ready."

Sixteen-year-old Linda Carrell led the way into the bedroom she shared with her younger sister. Removing a pile of paper dolls from the dressing-chest and sweeping a small table clear of a sticky sweet and an open picture-book she gave a disgusted snort.

"Honestly, that child, Jill, is a trial to share a room with! If only I were the eldest like Mandy, with a room all to myself! Or like you—the only one."

Her friend Sally pulled off her blazer and gave a good-humoured chuckle.

"Don't pretend you envy *me*, for goodness' sake! You know you'd hate to be an only. I'd hate it even

more, myself, if I wasn't able to sort of share your family."

"Oh, I know, really." Linda gave a little laugh. "Anyway, when Mandy gets married I shall have her room. . . ."

In imagination she saw her older sister in white tulle and orange blossoms, herself as chief bridesmaid, perhaps in blue. . . . And afterwards she would take over Mandy's room; distemper it in pale colours and save up her pocket money to buy curtains. She sighed faintly and then laughed again. "But what's the use of thinking? Mandy's not quite eighteen and here I am marrying her off already!"

"Well, I wouldn't be surprised if she gets married early. She's so awfully pretty," Sally said earnestly.

"Yes, she is, isn't she," Linda agreed enthusiastically. Turning to the glass she made a little grimace at her own reflection and drew the comb swiftly through the fine black hair which she wore almost to shoulder length and cut in a fringe above the dark curved line of her eyebrows.

Watching her, Sally reflected that Mandy might be beautiful, but Linda looked . . . interesting. With her hair confined in a ribbon as it had to be at school one did not notice it so much, but now with it released and falling softly round her small pale face with its high cheekbones and large dark eyes, there was something unusual and even vaguely Italian about her.

∴ Sally gave her own freckled face and sandy hair a very brief inspection. Rather plain and with no talents whatever, would have been her description of herself, but she was quite philosophical about it. She counted herself lucky to be Linda's best friend and to have an

open invitation to join the lively Carrell household whenever she cared to.

Linda's mind had drifted back to the exciting news she had heard only that afternoon.

"I'm dying to tell Tony about the new orchestra. You won't mind popping in next door with me directly after tea, Sally?"

"No. All right. . . ."

Sally's tone was a little bleak. Linda and Tony would be joining the orchestra together, of course, but she had reckoned on having Linda to herself this evening. However, it wasn't sporting to be jealous of Linda's musical interests, even if she herself was a dud at such things.

From below came Mrs. Carrell's call.

"Tea's ready, girls."

Linda and Sally ran downstairs and took their places at the tea-table in the pleasant room overlooking the garden. Mrs. Carrell, small and plump with fair hair, had a rather absent-minded look in her blue eyes. In her youth she had shown some promise as an artist. Now her family were apt to tease her about her "wool-gathering", but not even her husband guessed at the self-discipline which had gradually changed a dreamy, unpractical person into a capable wife and mother, with only an occasional lapse. Now she greeted Sally warmly and listened to Linda's laughing protest at her small sister's treatment of their bedroom, while pouring tea at the same time.

"Nice to see you again, Sally. Linda, dear, you're not always so marvellously tidy yourself, you know. Jill will try to remember, won't you, darling?"

Jill nodded cheerfully. A plump six-year-old with a sunny disposition, nothing worried her for long.

Now the front door slammed noisily and light footsteps clicked swiftly through the hall. Mandy Carrell, nearly eighteen and quite lovely with her soft golden hair and pink cheeks, paused gracefully in the doorway almost as if realizing what a pretty picture she made, framed in the dark oak. But Mandy was not really vain. From a tiny child she had been used to admiration and she accepted her good looks as a person born to riches accepts wealth; appreciating its power, yet not thinking about it very much.

"Mummy . . ." said Mandy now, "I met Tony on the corner. I told him to come in here to tea. Mrs. Ryan has gone to one of her everlasting bridge parties."

Linda glanced at her sister almost indignantly. Now what on earth had made Mandy do that? Just when she and Sally had planned to get Tony to themselves and tell him about the new orchestra. Mandy, of course, wouldn't be in the least interested in that and probably only wanted to nab Tony for tennis or something.

"Tony should be practising this evening," she said severely.

Mandy helped herself to a scone and laughed lightly.

"Heavens, Lin! Let the poor chap have some refreshment, at least! And as for this evening, I suppose he can please himself. I haven't asked him yet, but I'm hoping he'll make up a four for tennis."

Linda looked down at her plate. Once or twice lately, she realized, Mandy had butted in like this where Tony was concerned. And it wasn't fair, because Tony had always been Linda's special friend, ever since the Ryans had come to live next door, six . . . no, it must be seven years ago. Among other things they shared a love of music and had learned the piano from

the same teachers. Then Tony had taken up the violin and Linda retaliated with the clarinet which she learned at school. Both of them cherished an ambition to take up music professionally but whereas Linda's parents were encouraging, Mrs. Ryan, who was a widow, was insistent that Tony must go in for something which would bring quicker monetary rewards.

For this reason Tony had been slacking lately and it was Linda who kept on at him about the need for practise, in case Mrs. Ryan should change her mind. She was about to explain this again to Mandy when there was a cheerful tattoo on the front door.

"There's Tony now, I expect," said Mrs. Carrell.

"I'll go!" cried Linda, but Mandy was already at the door. She had moved away from the table gracefully and with no appearance of haste, but Linda caught her knee against the table leg, almost upsetting her tea.

Linda sat down again, defeated. Somehow Mandy always contrived to make her feel so young, though there was only eighteen months' difference between their ages. And she did it so casually, so subtly, that there never seemed a chance to make a fuss about it; or if one did, Mandy was so sweet and apologetic that Linda felt more gauche than ever.

Tony Ryan was tall and thin with a shock of fair hair, the front lock of which fell constantly over his forehead to be swept back impatiently with a long nervous hand. He grinned across at Sally, tweaked Jill's stubby plaits and slid into the chair next to Linda.

"Hope it's all right, butting in again like this, Mrs. Carrell. But Mandy said——"

Mrs. Carrell interrupted him with a smile.

"Now, Tony, you've known us long enough to accept the fact that you're welcome as flowers in May. Pass the bread-and-butter. Jill. Well, Tony, how's everything?"

Tony made a rueful grimace.

"Pretty awful really. I scamped some prep last night and I seem to have been in hot water all day. Poor Mum's going to have a horrid shock when my report comes in, I'm afraid."

Mrs. Carrell shook her head at him.

"Bad lad. Can't you turn over a new leaf?"

Tony grinned wickedly.

"I keep turning them over. Should think I'm almost to the end of the book."

"How's the new Sonata going?" asked Linda.

"Fairish. That's what I was working on last night instead of the maths, you'll be pleased to know." He leaned forward eagerly. "I thought perhaps you'd be a sport and run through it with me after tea."

"Of course," said Linda eagerly, but Mandy pouted, her big blue eyes fastened on Tony appealingly.

"Oh, Tony, I wanted you to play tennis! It's a shame to waste such a lovely evening indoors."

"Sorry, old thing, but I really do want to get the hang of that Sonata. It's a beast."

"Oh well, of course, if you prefer to be a long-haired sissy. But it would be a jolly sight better for your muscles if you played tennis."

Tony bared a brown arm.

"What's wrong with that for muscle?" he asked indignantly. "And as for long-haired sissies, what about all your Art School blokes?"

He shook his fist at Mandy threateningly, but she only smiled faintly and getting up from the table said:

"You won't mind if I fly, Mummy? If Tony won't come I'll have to ring up someone else. Graham and his partner are meeting me on the court at six."

"Lucky thing!" muttered Linda. "Wish I went to Art School. No prep or anything. A lady's life. Have you finished, Sally? Buck up, Tony. We've got something frightfully exciting to tell you. Let's go into the other room."

She caught her mother's eye appealingly. Mrs. Carrell nodded with a tolerant smile.

"All right, you three. Jill will help me wash up, won't you, darling?"

Tony picked up his violin case from the corner of the hall and followed the two girls into the big front room. The chintz covers had faded to a soft blur of colours and the carpet had seen many years of hard wear. The ebony case of the open grand piano had lost some of its gloss and the piles of music were stacked on it untidily, yet the room had a charm of its own. Big bowls of garden flowers, beautifully arranged, and gay cushions embroidered by Mrs. Carrell's busy fingers did much to distract the eye from any shabbiness. It was a happy room.

Linda bounced on to the settee and clasped her arms round her knees.

"Tony, guess what . . ." she said earnestly.

"You've been offered an engagement with the London Philharmonic," suggested Tony mockingly.

"Don't be ridiculous! No, this concerns you as well."

Tony spread his hands in a hopeless gesture.

"I give up. It's an impossible hazard."

Linda drew a deep breath.

"We are going to have a Junior Orchestra in Harbridge at last!"

"No . . . ! Golly, that is news! How, when and where?"

"Miss Truett told me about it this afternoon when I was having my clarinet lesson. She's managed to get the Council interested and they've persuaded the owner to let us have the hall in the High Street, once a week," Linda told him breathlessly. "Anyone interested is to meet there on Monday evening at six o'clock. I forgot to ask if there'd be a test or anything. I shall die if I don't get in, won't you?"

"You'll be all right. They always want wood-winds. Competition, if any, will be among the strings." Tony slid the bow lightly across his violin in a soft scale, affecting a casual attitude to hide a twinge of anxiety. It *would* be pretty ghastly to be turned down.

But Linda brushed aside any doubts with a decided:

"Don't be modest. You know you're good enough to get in, whoever else doesn't."

"Well, we'll both be there for certain on Monday, anyway." Tony struck a note on the piano and began to tune his violin, his face intent. "We'd better get on though. I'll have to leave in about half an hour. I've got stacks of prep and Mum is probably back already."

Linda got up and moved towards the piano. Sally, who had been curled up on the window-seat listening to their conversation, took a deep breath and said a little shakily:

"I've just remembered. We told Miss Hallam we'd do the house-to-house collection for the Orphanage flag-day on Monday evening."

"Oh, bother . . ." Linda bit her lip, but Tony said carelessly:

"I'll go and see her and explain that we'll have to

do it on Tuesday instead. The personal touch, you know. *Such* a charming boy!"

"Charming boy, my foot!" said Sally rudely. "The emphasis is on the boy part. If you were a mere girl you'd probably be told that a promise is a promise."

Tony grinned.

"It's a man's world, my dears, as you'll learn still more, the older you grow. All right . . . all right . . . I apologize. You can have the world. It's all yours."

Tony dodged laughingly as the girls came towards him with infuriated expressions, then he said more seriously:

"Honestly, though, we really must get on. Ready, Linda?"

Curled up on the window-seat again, Sally listened as the music poured forth; imperfect perhaps, yet having that little something which lifts the amateur performance out of the mediocre. She watched the serious and intent faces of her two friends and sighed softly.

Yes. She did feel a little forlorn sometimes, because music meant so much to these other two and she had no part in it; and now that they were going to join an orchestra it would be worse. But she mustn't be selfish, she told herself hastily. It would be lovely for them. Good for Tony, too, if what Linda was always saying was true; that he didn't practise nearly as much as he should.

And that was his mother's fault. Sally had little knowledge of music herself, but everyone—even Martin Grant, his music master—said Tony might have a brilliant future if only he could be allowed to take it up professionally. . . .

The music came to a triumphant finish. Linda

and Linda stood up and bowed mockingly towards Sally, who clapped her hands.

"I was marvellously lucky . . ."

Linda bowed Linda's humorous look.

"Oh, I told Sally! The perfect audience. Always willing to applaud the performance even when it's suffering with faults. Well, it was better, anyway, Linda. Thanks awfully. Shall we . . . ?" He glanced out of the window and broke off with an almost guilty look, adding hastily, "Here's Mum."

A moment later Mrs. Carrell came into the room with Mrs. Ryan. The latter, a small fair-skinned woman with ash-blond hair, would have been quite attractive were it not for a petulant expression. Ignoring the two girls now she told Tony, in a complaining voice:

"I've been back a long while, Tony."

Tony took his fiddle from his chin and packed it hastily into its case.

"I'm sorry, Mum. Linda and I were practising the Sonata."

"Of course I realize that your music must always come first," his mother said bitterly, putting her hand with its great sparkling rings to her forehead with a dramatic gesture. "I've a simply splitting headache and I was hoping you'd make me a cup of tea. . . ."

"I'll get one for you, shall I, Mrs. Ryan?" Linda moved quickly to the door, but Mrs. Ryan stopped her with a weary gesture.

"Thank you, my dear, but I must get to bed at once. I'll have Tony bring tea and aspirins up to me. Come, darling."

The two girls went with them to the door and waved good-bye, then Linda put her arm through Sally's and gave it a little squeeze.

"I'm afraid it's been a bit dull for you, Sal."

"It hasn't. I enjoyed the playing, really."

"Well, let's do our prep together now and get it over, shall we? They're not expecting you home too early, are they? Mandy's sure to bring in some of her crew and there'll be a bit of fun. Pity Tony couldn't stay."

Sally nodded.

"At least, if I have to be an only, I'm jolly glad I've got sensible parents. It must be pretty awful to be the only son of a widow; if they're like Mrs. Ryan, that is. If it wasn't for her passion for bridge, Tony would get scarcely any freedom at all."

"And he's so decent about it. He worries awfully when she keeps on about being lonely and about him being the only thing in life left to her. You know," Linda put her head on one side consideringly, "what I'd really like would be for her to find another husband."

"She's too old, surely?"

"Oh, I don't know. People do. . . . And sometimes she looks quite attractive; especially when she's enjoying herself and not thinking about how hard done by she is."

"Well, there's your mission in life," said Sally, laughing, "to find a new husband for Mrs. Ryan. I wish you luck! And just by the way, hadn't we better get to work?"

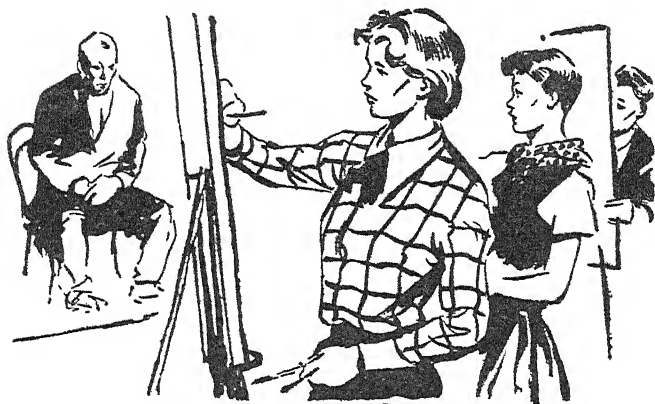
"All right. We'll do our prep in here, shall we? Dad's got Music Hall on the wireless and we'll never be able to concentrate if we go in there. I don't know how he *can*! When there's a wonderful concert on the Home Service that I'd simply love to listen to. What low tastes my friends and relations have!"

Sally took her books out of her case and arranged them on the little table by the window. She giggled at Linda's remark and enquired teasingly:

"Didn't you almost strangle yourself with laughter at my house last week, listening to the same programme?"

Linda laughed.

"Oh, I expect so. I'm not really as highbrow as all that!"



## CHAPTER TWO

### MANDY

MANDY wore a pink candy-striped cotton dress with a little white hat and white shoes. She made an attractive picture as she tripped along the road in the morning sunshine beside her sister.

Linda threw her an admiring glance. Now in her last year at school, it was to the younger girl a constant source of annoyance that she must still wear the regulation green frock and darker green blazer, and the grey felt hat with the green band. Like most of the older girls at her school she wore this latter affliction well to the back of her head and squashed into an almost unrecognizable shape. Now she gave it a rebellious tweak which made Mandy smile.

"It doesn't seem five minutes since *I* was doing that," she said sympathetically.

"Well over a year. Oh, Mandy, isn't it simply marvellous to be able to wear just what you like?"

"Heavenly. One gets so sick of that everlasting uniform, I know. But cheer up, Lin. It will be your turn soon. You've only got to wait."

"I'm waiting. . . ."

Linda went off into a day-dream. A year from now, if all went well, she would be going in for the entrance exam to the Royal College of Music. And after that . . .

"Well, here's where we part," Mandy interrupted the dream. "Cheerio, Lin. Don't get yourself run over or you won't *have* any future."

She smiled and waved, then crossed the road to join another girl who also attended the local School of Art, leaving Linda to continue on her way to school.

Later that afternoon Mandy, with the rest of the Life Class, was engaged in trying to transfer to paper the features and figure of the model on the dais in the middle of the room; an old man with a brown lined face and a faraway expression in his eyes.

With her indiarubber Mandy slowly removed the tip of the grand old nose, only to replace it a moment later and lean back to regard her picture with a doubtful frown. She was feeling just a little bored, but looking round at the earnest faces of the other pupils she could see no immediate prospect of enlivenment and began to doodle idly on the margin of her paper.

Mandy had never been brilliant at school and was not sorry to leave. When asked to choose a career, however, there didn't seem to be a thing she really wanted to do. But a career she apparently must have, so at last she said cheerfully that she would rather like to be a fashion artist.

Mrs. Carrell, whose talent with brush and pencil

was considerable, was secretly a little doubtful about her eldest daughter's ability, but when Mandy remarked rather aggrievedly that the Art Mistress at school had said she was quite good, her mother felt she must at least have her chance.

So Mandy was enrolled at the Art School. If she, herself, sometimes suspected that her talent was not very great, she did not let it worry her. She was popular with the girls and the boys, and life was fun.

Now her glance drifted round the big room again and came to rest on the girl beside her. Jacqueline Carter was a newcomer to the school only that week; a tall, slim girl with dark curly hair cut very short. Unfriendly, someone had said she was, and there was certainly something about the taut expression of the girl's mouth and a shadowed look in the grey eyes that seemed to forbid the usual good-natured inquisitiveness.

Leaning a little sideways Mandy could see the painting on the next easel and found herself watching, fascinated, the confident sweep of the paint-brush as it blocked in the shadows and etched fine lines on the face of the model. Suddenly the girl flung down the brush with an impatient gesture and sighed. Mandy said impulsively:

"Don't look so fed up. It's simply marvellous!"

Jacqueline turned her head with a startled expression. For a moment the brooding look lifted, then it dropped again and she continued to regard her picture with a dissatisfied air.

Mandy giggled softly and turned her own easel round.

"I'm afraid I haven't done him justice at all," she said ruefully. "He's such a poppet really, but I've

made him look as if he has a bunion growing on the end of his poor old nose."

The other girl's mouth softened for a moment in an unwilling smile, then she turned away and picked up her paint-brush again, pretending to be absorbed. To give the pretty girl beside her any encouragement seemed a contradiction of her resolve to hate Harbridge and everything connected with it. Until now it had not been difficult. The differences between this London suburb and the large provincial town in which she had spent her previous years had all been in favour of the latter, in her opinion. A fresh sense of tragedy and loss swept over her as she worked feverishly at the background of her painting and at last she had to lay down her paint-brush and fumble in her pocket for her handkerchief. Oh glory, what had she done with it? She brushed her hand impatiently across her eyes and, glancing sideways, saw that the girl at the next easel was still watching her.

"Here . . ." said Mandy simply, and handed across a clean handkerchief so swiftly that none of the other students noticed.

Gratefully taking the little square of cambric, Jacqueline dabbed furtively at her eyes and blew her nose.

"Thanks," she said shakily, the corners of her mouth turning upwards fleetingly. "I'll get it washed and give it back. . . ."

"Any time," said Mandy airily, and bent her head to her own drawing again.

But she could not get out of her mind the other girl's stricken face. Never having known real trouble herself the thought of it almost scared her. That Jacqueline was in trouble was obvious and Mandy

remembered remorsefully that only the previous day she had joined in a conversation with the other students and agreed that the new girl was stand-offish and unfriendly. And all the time they knew nothing about her; knew nothing of what had made her seem like that.

Anxious to make amends, Mandy followed Jacqueline into the cloakroom at the end of the afternoon and, avoiding other offers of company, contrived that they should leave together. Along the road she chatted gaily and when Jacqueline had been persuaded at least to admit that she was a stranger in Harbridge, Mandy paused at the corner and said impulsively:

"Look . . . if you're not doing anything else this evening, why not come along to tea at our house? My mother would love to meet you. She paints, too; or, at least, she does when she can get any time off from the family."

Jacqueline hesitated. Was Mandy just feeling sorry for her because of what had happened earlier in the afternoon? In spite of her firm resolve to make no ties in the future because those she had severed hurt so much, a sudden longing for company made her waver. Mandy pressed her advantage.

"Do come. A couple of the boys will be coming round after tea, I expect, and we could have some tennis. You do play? Well, I'll lend you a racquet."

That settled it. She hadn't had a game since she and her brother Joe had come to Harbridge. She said shyly:

"I'd like to come, thank you. If I could just 'phone my aunt. . . ."

"Of course. From our house. It isn't far. Shall we take a bus, or walk?"

Deciding on the latter, they took a turning off the High Street and Mandy asked:

"You live with your aunt?"

"Yes . . ." Jacqueline hesitated again, half regretful that she had accepted the invitation. But it was too late to retract now and she supposed she would have to explain some time. She went on abruptly. "My mother died in June, you see. She was the younger sister of the aunt I'm with now. . . ."

"Oh, how beastly for you!"

There was such genuine sympathy in the rather childish expression that Jacqueline felt better. It was even, she discovered, a relief to talk after keeping silent so long.

"Dad died earlier . . . in the war, you know. It seems simply ages ago. Mother had a job. She . . . she worked too hard, I think. . . ." Jacqueline choked, then went on fiercely: "When . . . when it happened, Aunt Margaret wrote to my brother Joe and said we had better come to live with her and Uncle. It meant leaving all our friends. And Aunt Margaret's so different . . . kind . . . but she doesn't understand. She thinks painting is a waste of time and only let me come this term to Art School because she's sorry for me. . . ."

"But you said you have a brother?"

"Oh yes. He's with me now, of course, but . . . it's different for boys, I think. Besides, he's going into the Army later on and then I don't know what I'll do . . ." Jacqueline's voice trailed away drearily.

"By that time you'll have made heaps of friends and it won't be so bad." Mandy squeezed Jacqueline's arm sympathetically and looked at her with such an anxious expression that Jacqueline forced a smile.

"Now tell me about *you*. . . ." she said.

Ten minutes later the two girls were walking down a tree-lined avenue, the paths edged with neat grass verges. The main structure of all the houses was similar, the only real differences being the colour of the paintwork and the arrangement of the front gardens, now gay with summer flowers.

Mandy stopped in front of a house whose rather shabby appearance was cancelled out by the gay flowered curtains at the windows and the careless beauty of its garden. She laughed.

"Here we are. Isn't it funny how houses give one away? Next door that way," she waved a hand to the right, "lives old Miss Hallam. She's a dear, but rather prim and full of good works. Hence the close-curtained windows and those awful geraniums and calceolarias in solid rows. The other side," she waved again, "houses Mrs. Ryan and her son, Tony. Tony is a great pal of ours, but Mrs. Ryan . . . well, you just have to note the frilly curtains and little art pots to guess what she's like! And ours—well, anyone can see with half an eye that we're a family without much money to spend on the house and that Mummy loves flowers but doesn't bother about order. Come on in. . . ."

Mandy was leading the way through the side gate and round to the back of the house. The door of the pleasant kitchen was wide open and now she hailed her mother gaily.

"Hallo, darling! I've brought a visitor. Jacqueline Carter. She's new at the Art School and new to Harbridge, so I thought we should all get acquainted. This is Mummy, Jacqueline."

Mrs. Carrell held out her hand and smiled a welcome.

"Nice to see you, dear. Take Jacqueline upstairs, Mandy. Tea's just ready and Linda's in a hurry to

begin because of this meeting she wants to go to this evening."

"That's my sister," explained Mandy, making for the stairs. "Oh, hallo, Lin! This is Jacqueline. Linda's musical," she went on in a teasing aside. "She plays the piano and makes excruciating noises on the clarinet."

"Don't be beastly, Mandy. And I say, you will buck up, won't you? I want to be down at the hall by six o'clock. Sorry, Jacqueline. I didn't mean you, of course. But Mandy always takes such ages titivating and Mummy won't make the tea until everyone's ready."

They were in the middle of the meal when the telephone rang. Mandy went to answer it and came back with a rueful face.

"That was Peter. He can't come round this evening, after all. It's a nuisance because Graham's coming and I thought we might have had some tennis. It's no fun with a threesome. Perhaps Tony——"

"You know perfectly well that Tony can't play tennis this evening!" Linda interrupted her sister swiftly. "He's coming to the meeting about the new Youth Orchestra."

"Well, he said himself that strings were two a penny, so he wouldn't be missed," Mandy said flippantly.

Linda stood up.

"You know that's just the way he talks. Of course he'll be wanted. Excuse me, Mummy, won't you. Tony's calling for me and we ought to be off in about five minutes."

"I shall ask him, anyway!" Mandy threw a parting shot as Linda disappeared. "Really, Linda seems to think she's Tony's boss sometimes!"

"Someone taking my name in vain?" A rough fair head poked through the open window.

"Come on in, Tony. I want to ask you something," Mandy said quickly. She had no real hope that Tony would give up his plans. But Jacqueline was watching and she was perhaps a little proud of her popularity. "Jacqueline, this is Tony Ryan who lives next door. Tony, Jacqueline wants to play tennis and we've only Graham now that Peter has fallen out. Couldn't you play?"

Mandy's blue eyes gazed appealingly at Tony as he greeted the other girl and then turned back to her apologetically.

"I'm really awfully sorry, Mandy, but I can't possibly." It was always hard to refuse Mandy. She was so jolly pretty and she had a way with her that made a fellow feel a cad if he didn't do what she asked. "There'll probably be someone up at the courts who would be glad to make up anyway," he added more firmly.

Mandy pouted prettily.

"It's much nicer to have one's own foursome. I should have thought you would have shown some consideration for . . . for Jacqueline."

Tony turned to the other girl, his eyes twinkling.

"Be careful of Mandy. She uses her friends as an excuse to get what she wants. Do you know, once she asked old Mr. Tomkins down the road if she could pick some of his cherries 'because the boy next door has been ill and he is so fond of them'!"

"That's simply ages ago! I was just a kid."

"Well, I'd better go and hurry Linda up, or we'll be late. Cheerio, girls."

Mandy made a grimace at his retreating figure.

"Tony and Linda are potty on music, of course. But it's a pity about the tennis. Oh well, we'll go up to the courts and see what happens."

Jacqueline felt guilty. Was Mandy sorry now that she had invited her to tea? Would she be odd man out?

"There's my brother, Joe," she said hesitantly. "I guess he'd come if I rang him."

"Would he? That would be marvellous. Come on, Jacqueline! The 'phone's in the hall. I'll show you."

Jacqueline lifted the receiver and dialled a number.

"Joe . . . ? It's Jacqueline. No, it's you I want to speak to. I say, the girl I'm with here wants you to make up a four for tennis this evening. Could you?"

There was a pause, then Jacqueline coloured and half-turned her back on Mandy. "Yes . . . Yes, she is. . . . Oh, Joe, you're awful . . . yes, all right."

Jacqueline replaced the receiver and laughed.

"What was all that about?" asked Mandy.

Jacqueline hesitated, then laughed again.

"He's coming round. He . . . he wanted to know if you were pretty. I said . . . well, you heard what I said. You mustn't take any notice of Joe. He's like that."

Mandy giggled.

"Let's hope he won't feel disappointed!"

Only a few minutes later the door-bell rang and there on the doorstep was a young man who grinned cheerfully at Jacqueline and shook hands with Mandy, on whom his brown eyes rested admiringly. Just then Linda and Tony came through the hall, carrying their instrument cases.

"My sister, Linda, and Tony Ryan. . . . This is Jacqueline's brother, Joe."

Mandy made the introduction carelessly, her gaze

slipping coldly over Tony to show that she was still annoyed with him.

"You won't mind if we hurry off? Come on, Tony. We'll be late."

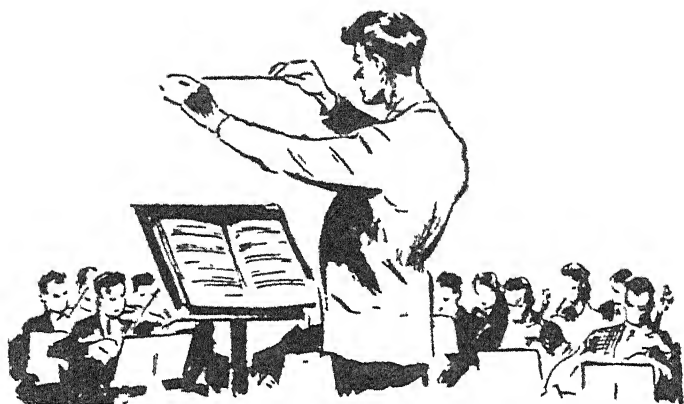
Linda gave a hurried nod and smile in the direction of the brother and sister and moved towards the door, painfully conscious that Tony showed a tendency to linger. It was horrid of Mandy to look at Tony like that. She hoped he wasn't going to let it spoil his evening. The thought sharpened her tongue as the door closed behind them at last.

"H'm, another admirer, I suppose! They're getting to be legion. . . ."

Almost as soon as the words were out of her mouth she regretted them. Mandy couldn't help being so pretty. It was natural that everyone should spoil her a little. And besides, boys hated you to be catty. Linda smiled and added hastily:

"How could anyone help falling for Mandy?"





### CHAPTER THREE

## THE NEW ORCHESTRA

“HERE we are. . . .”

Tony paused before the tall building. Its tattered posters referred to past glories, its shining new ones advertised a Grand Flannel Dance, a performance by a local Dramatic Society and a meeting for those interested in some strange new cult. He pushed open a door and held it back for Linda.

From inside came the weird wailing sound of several musical instruments in process of tuning. There was a platform at one end of the hall but most of the chairs had been stacked in corners. Small groups of boys and girls, their ages ranging from fifteen to eighteen, were sawing away at violins, tooting on flutes, or bowing mournfully on cellos. In the far corner a tall young man in grey flannels was talking to a small fair woman in a blue dress.

Tony glanced in their direction and raised his eyebrows. Linda exclaimed excitedly:

"That's Miss Truett . . . !"

"Your music mistress? She's much younger than I imagined. Somehow I've always thought of her as tall and spinsterish."

Tony laughed but Linda looked shocked.

"Goodness, no! She's sweet. She's an 'old girl' too, and the Head calls her 'Clare'. Who's the man, I wonder?"

Tony's eyes were twinkling.

"I give you three guesses. . . ."

Linda opened her eyes widely.

"Not . . . Martin Grant . . . your violin master?"

"The very same. And he never breathed a word when I went to my lesson!"

"Perhaps he didn't know then about the orchestra. Do you think he's going to conduct?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. Maybe he's just been roped in by the fair Clare."

Linda sent an admiring glance over at the corner.

"He's awfully good-looking."

Tony gave a contemptuous snort.

"As if that mattered! He's a very fine musician. First violinist in a London orchestra and plays the flute, the oboe and the clarinet besides." He looked round the room a trifle ruefully. "As I thought. Bags of strings. Too many, I should think."

"I don't. Anyway, Martin Grant knows what you can do and he's not likely to turn down his own pupil." Linda took her clarinet out of its case, warming it in her hands and running up a scale softly. "Look, they're almost ready now. . . ."

The buzz of conversation and the confusion of

tuning noises died away gradually as Clare Truett and Martin Grant climbed on to the platform and stood there smiling down at the young people. Clare was obviously a little diffident, for she gave Martin a nudge and whispered audibly:

"Go on, Martin. You can do the talking."

With a slight shrug of his broad shoulders Martin stepped forward.

"Well, folks . . . Miss Truett here seems rather shy, but it is she who should be telling you about our new venture because it was her idea and she has done all the work. . . ."

He smiled again in Clare's direction but she only shook her head and indicated that she wanted him to go on.

"As some of you may know, Miss Truett had the idea of this Junior Orchestra quite a long time ago, but there were all sorts of difficulties concerning money, premises, etcetera. But Miss Truett has a persuasive way about her—as I, who have been roped in to conduct, should know—and she has never stopped trying. This meeting is the result of her efforts. Mr. Vernon, who is the owner of this hall, is also on the Town Council. Not only has he been persuaded to lend his support of the application for a grant, but he has also allowed us the use of the hall once a week and provisionally booked a date for our first concert."

Martin paused and someone raised a shout.

"Three cheers for Mr. Vernon!"

"The point Mr. Vernon made, however, was this," continued Martin. "Is it wise to start this new orchestra in the summer? Or should we leave it until the autumn? The provisional date for our first concert is November, and we should really begin now and keep going. But it's up to you. What do you say?"

The eager faces turned to the platform were full of interest as hands waved and voices clamoured their desire to begin at once. With the Town Council's support and a man like Martin Grant to conduct them, to what heights might they not attain? Some of the more optimistic even saw visions of the new orchestra winning auditions at the B.B.C. and silver shields at Musical Festivals.

Martin nodded.

"Good. Then you're all enthusiastic. It only remains to fix the details and make a start. There will be a small subscription—the amount hasn't been settled yet, but it will be as modest as we can make it. Now, any questions?"

"What's the limit? I mean, what is the maximum number of players that can join?" someone asked rather anxiously.

Martin looked at Clare. She whispered something and he gave a laughing shrug and spread his hands in an eloquent gesture.

"Let 'em all come—within reason. We shan't limit the strings and we can just manage with the woodwinds here present. I see also one horn." He glanced round at the twenty-odd members already assembled and raised his eyebrows comically. "Rope in anyone you like and, of course, if you know someone who has some good tymps to give away, we're willing to pay for the cartage!"

As everyone knew that the drums—or tymps, as they were always called—cost a great deal of money, this optimistic remark raised a howl of laughter. Martin and Clare climbed down from the platform and began to take the names of those who wished to enrol. Tony nudged Linda.

"See that chap over there? That's Johnny Vernon, the son of the man who owns the hall. Now I know why his father is so interested. I can't stand the chap!"

Linda looked across at a tall boy whose thick fair hair had been subjected to the latest "crew" cut and whose tie of vivid green was patterned with yellow prancing horses. He was handling a new and rather expensive-looking violin in a most inexpert way.

"What's the matter with him?" she asked, laughing a little.

"Money. His father's got pots of it. Johnny has a new craze every six months and father pays for it. Gosh, you should see his electric railway! And his racing bicycle! Last winter he was crazy on amateur dramatics. Now, I suppose, it's music."

"Well, I suppose we must be thankful to him in a way," Linda said seriously, but Tony gave a disgusted snort and turned his attention to the other end of the hall.

"Look, that girl with the flute seems to be the last. It looks as if we're going to try something out now."

As Tony spoke, Clare was moving about the hall putting copies of music on the stands which had been arranged in a rough semi-circle. And presently Martin Grant came over to Tony.

"Come on, old man. I'll try you out as leader, I think. We're going to run through this simple little Bach minuet."

With a pleased flush Tony moved to his place as leader of the first violins and after some discussion and rearrangement of the other members, Martin raised his baton and tapped the stand.

"Now, are we all ready? We'll take it slowly. . . ."

Very shakily, the new orchestra began to play.

Linda felt a mounting sense of excitement as they progressed somewhat uncertainly through the piece. Their playing might be full of faults—in fact, to the right of her she could hear an oboe player groaning away much too loudly and the one horn player seemed slightly flat—but it was still a lovely feeling to be a part of this pattern of melody. In her imagination she saw each note as a different-coloured thread, crossing and recrossing, mingling and blending into one satisfying whole. When they came to the final bar and the last note died away she glanced across at Tony and they exchanged a triumphant look. She knew that he must have been feeling just like that, too.

“Right. I’m afraid that must be all for this evening.” Martin Grant closed his score and nodded pleasantly at the young performers. I hope I shall be seeing you all again next Monday.”

As they put away their stands and handed in the copies of their music, Martin came over and paused at Tony’s side.

“Good work, Tony. I’ll continue with you as leader. Glad you came along.”

“Thank you, sir.” Tony bent to put away his violin, hiding his flush of pleasure. Linda whispered earnestly:

“I like your Martin Grant most awfully. It’s funny, isn’t it, how we both got the wrong impression? Somehow I’d always thought of him as an old man with a beard.”

“He’s quite decent,” Tony said carelessly, “but he gets frightfully ratty sometimes. He never seems to realize that it isn’t always easy for me to get in a lot of practice; especially not when Mum has one of her headaches.”

Linda thought it best not to answer this. She knew

what she thought of Mrs. Ryan's complaining ways, but it would be as much as her friendship was worth to tell Tony so. He would flare up hotly in defence of his mother and she supposed it was right that he should. So she only said, as they left the hall:

"Anyway, I was awfully pleased that he made you leader. You jolly well deserved it. You're much better than any of the other players there."

"Thank you kindly, lady." Tony grinned and swept back the front of his hair with his usual impatient gesture. "You're not so bad yourself. I never thought much of the clarinet as a solo instrument at one time, but I'm being converted."

"Honestly, I didn't realize that I was going to get so keen," Linda admitted. "Actually at first it was only because I knew that I'd have to have a second instrument for the College. I've always loved the piano, of course, but I wonder sometimes if I'd sooner play or teach the clarinet for a *living*." She paused and said fervently, "Oh, Tony, I do wish your mother would think about letting you go to the College, too!"

Tony frowned.

"We've had all that out before," he said almost crossly. "Mum's looking forward to the time when I can look after her and take my place as the man of the house. If Dad had lived, it might have been different. As it is——"

He broke off suddenly and they both turned at a call from behind. It was Mandy with Jackie and the two boys. They waited at the Carrells' gate until the others caught them up.

"Hallo, you two! Aren't you coming in, Tony?" Mandy asked. "We've just decided to raid the kitchen

and make stacks of sandwiches and some coffee. We've had a gruelling game—Joe and I against Jacqueline and Graham. We won; only at seven-five two sets, though."

Tony said quickly:

"I'll just pop in first and see if Mum's all right."

The others went in and Linda waited at the gate. But though she waited quite five minutes Tony did not reappear and she began to think Mrs. Ryan had made her usual objections. Rather dispiritedly Linda went into her own house and upstairs. Jill was in bed and fast asleep. Linda leaned on the window-sill and gazed out across the garden. She could hear the others downstairs laughing and talking but she was curiously reluctant to join them.

If only she were older. It was rather horrid being the younger sister. Not that there was all that difference between her age and Mandy's; but a year and a half did make a gulf at this age.

And that wasn't the only difference between she and Mandy. Being born beautiful made a difference, too. It made one more sure of oneself surely; more certain of being wanted.

Linda stayed upstairs for quite a long time. If only Tony had come in, or if Sally had been there. She wouldn't have minded going down then.

But the plunge had to be made some time. Turning to the glass, she drew the comb swiftly through her dark hair, then, giving herself a mental shake, ran out of the room.

She was half-way down the stairs when she heard Tony's voice. He must have returned without her hearing him. Looking over the banisters she could see him in the kitchen, watching Mandy concoct

a mixture which she said was compounded of tomato, chutney and a scraping of cheese.

"Whatever it is, I'd rather not have it in *my* sandwiches," he declared rudely, and Mandy retaliated by dabbing him with the mixture from a wooden spoon. Then they chased each other round the table. Linda saw Tony's arm slip around Mandy's waist and remain there for quite some time and feeling very much out of things she left them to it and went on into the lounge where Mr. and Mrs. Carrell were sitting, smiling a little at the sounds of the fun.

"Hallo, dear! How did the meeting go?" Mrs. Carrell asked.

Linda told her about it and about how Martin had singled Tony out as leader. But somehow she felt flat and some of the pleasure had gone out of the evening. What was the good of Tony being a brilliant musician if nothing was going to come of it? If he had decided definitely to make no effort to get his mother to change her mind? Something of her worry must have shown in her voice, for Mrs. Carrell asked a little anxiously:

"Are you feeling tired, dear? I could bring you up something in bed if you'd rather get off before this hooligan crowd comes in here."

She smiled indulgently as another burst of laughter came from the kitchen, for there was nothing the Carrells liked better than to fill their home with young people.

The Carrell "open house" was the envy of all the other young people in the neighbourhood and some of the older folk thought it a little strange that young company was preferred to their own. "Can't think how you manage to feed them all," was one of their frequent objections.

At that Mrs. Carrell would laugh easily.

"But I don't! At least, all I give them is a few sandwiches and coffee or tea. I just let them loose in the kitchen and let them help themselves and clear up afterwards."

Now, as her mother looked at Linda a little anxiously, Linda smiled.

"I'm all right, Mummy. Really . . ."

Suddenly the door was flung open and the others streamed in. Tony was carrying a tray full of cups of coffee and the other two boys had plates of sandwiches. Mandy, herself empty-handed, directed operations.

"Pull up the little table, Linda. Joe, put those on the cakestand. Dad, do stop Graham fooling about like that. Those things will be on the floor any minute."

She subsided with weary grace into a chair as though she had done the bulk of the work, whereas in reality she had done little else but fuss over her "rat poison" as Tony had rudely nicknamed the sandwich spread. Graham Frazer, a thickset young man with a mop of tow-coloured hair, endeavoured to beat Joe to her with the sandwiches, while Tony handed round cups of coffee.

Jacqueline sank on to a low pouffe beside Linda, her grey-green eyes no longer shadowed with misery, but alight and laughing as she listened to the gay banter.

"Have a sandwich, Mrs. Carrell," her brother was saying with easy familiarity, but Tony chipped in:

"Not one of those. Give Mrs. Carrell one of the sardine sort. I don't trust this lot. Mandy's going to eat them all herself."

Mandy stretched out a languid hand.

"Pass me a sardine sandwich, please, Tony."

"Oh no, you don't. You'll eat one of your own if I have to feed you myself! Stop her, Joe! At least make her try one so that we can see the results."

Joe looked at Mandy adoringly and munched bravely.

"Don't you take any notice of him. They're fine. I like them."

Laughing at them and talking away to Jacqueline, to whom she had taken an immediate liking, Linda quite forgot the little sense of unhappiness which had threatened to cloud her evening. Perhaps she was silly to bother herself about Tony's future quite so much. Maybe he would get to the top in spite of his mother; and in spite of her own failure at pushing him. If he didn't, then it was because he didn't want it enough. And just serve him right!

When the washing-up had been done and the party became quieter, Linda drifted over to the piano at their request and began to play softly. As the lovely liquid notes of the first movement of the "Moonlight Sonata" filled the room a stillness came over the little company. Tony's sensitive hands were still and Jacqueline's mouth drooped wistfully. The music died away and there was silence, then a soft murmur of appreciation.

As if purposely to shatter the moment, Mandy jumped to her feet and, turning over the music on the piano, dropped on to the stand in front of Linda a copy of a popular dance tune.

With a swift change of mood, Linda's fingers sped over the keys, her slight body swaying with the rhythm. In a moment Joe had seized Mandy round the waist, Tony pulled Jacqueline to her feet and Graham beat time with his hands as he crooned the words.

In the middle of it all the door opened and a small round figure in blue-and-white pyjamas stood blinking at them all sleepily.

"I'm hungry . . ." Jill asserted stoutly.

Mr. Carrell jumped to his feet, laughing, and swung the little girl up to his shoulders.

"Poor pet! Let's raid the kitchen ourselves, shall we? And then perhaps these noisy young people will pipe down a bit and let you get your beauty sleep."

Joe looked at his watch.

"I say, sir, my sister and I should be going. Hi there, Jacqueline, we'd better be saying good-bye or Aunt Margaret will be throwing a fit."

Jacqueline stood up. As she said good-bye to Mrs. Carrell she said shyly:

"Mandy says you paint. Would you . . . would you let me bring some of my things to show you sometime?"

"My dear, I'd love it. There's a little attic at the top of the house that I call my studio. You and I will have a nice little session to ourselves up there, one day very soon. That's a promise, eh?" Mrs. Carrell bent over and kissed Jacqueline with a little ache in her heart. From Mandy she had already learned of the girl's loss; of her gift, so despised by her aunt. Anything she could do to help would be a pleasure and a privilege.

In a few minutes the party had broken up. As the door shut behind their visitors Mandy stretched her arms widely and yawned.

"I'll go straight up, I think. Good night, Mummy. Come on, Lin. I do want to show you something I bought at lunch-time."

They went up the stairs together and in her bedroom Mandy displayed to Linda's admiring glance the

blue silk blouse she had bought out of the dress allowance her father had recently decided to give her.

"Sweet, isn't it? I had to have something to go with my dirndl and this is exactly the right shade. Tell you what, Lin. You can have my pink one if you like. It's a tiny bit tight for me. Here you are. Take it now."

"Oh, Mandy, thanks awfully!" Linda took the offering gratefully. "Are you sure you don't want it? All right. Good night then, Mandy."

Going into her own room, where Jill was now curled tightly in a ball and fast asleep, Linda went to the glass and held the blouse against herself to try the effect.

It was nice of Mandy to have given it to her. And she hadn't worn it for ages, so no one would be likely to recognize it. Linda frowned a little anxiously. Well, she just hoped they wouldn't, anyway.





#### CHAPTER FOUR

### PARTY PIECE

"TONY said Miss Hallam was as sweet as pie about the collecting." Linda swung her school case to and fro idly as she and Sally waited after school for the bus. "So I'll see you tonight directly after tea. We're doing Moreton Avenue and all the turnings out of Burton Road. I hope it doesn't take too long. I must get in some practice."

"I'll be there," Sally agreed. "I haven't had a chance to ask you about the meeting last night. How did it go?"

"Oh, fine! We're beginning at once. And wasn't it funny? Martin Grant—Tony's music master—is going to conduct. He's awfully good-looking and quite young. We wondered if he and Miss Truett are . . . are——"

"Something more than friends, as they say?" Sally interrupted with a giggle.

"That's it. Oh, and Mr. Vernon—that's the owner of the hall, you know—has persuaded the Council to give us a grant. His son, Johnny, has joined the orchestra and I suppose he's interested because of that. Tony doesn't like Johnny though."

Sally nodded.

"I know Johnny Vernon. People say he's spoiled, but he hasn't a mother so I suppose it's natural that his father is wrapped up in him. Look, here's the bus now. . . ."

The queue moved forward slowly and the two girls swung on to the step and raced up the stairs to the upper deck. They were both wearing the school uniform dresses and now, out of sight of authority, Linda pulled off the hated headgear and stuffed it into her case.

"Mandy brought home a new girl from the Art School yesterday," she remarked.

"Nice?"

"Very. Rather quiet. Mandy said she's lost her mother recently. She has a brother named Joe and they roped him in for tennis. Rather fun . . . smitten with Mandy, of course."

"They always are."

The two younger girls sighed faintly and stared into space. In some remote future they would both marry, of course; somebody frightfully good-looking and with a reasonable amount of money. But it did seem as though beauty like Mandy's gave one an almost unfair advantage.

"Just think of the awfully plain married women one meets," said Sally hopefully, voicing their thoughts.

Linda giggled.

"Probably 'naice, sensible girls,'" she retorted, mimicking their headmistress's prim voice. "And that's what we are not, Sally, as the Head said yesterday when she met us tearing along the corridor." She sighed. "It's an awful responsibility being a Prefect and having to show an example to the Juniors. . . ."

"Moreton Avenue!" shouted the conductor raucously, and the two girls jumped up from their seats and scrambled down the stairs of the bus. Already Linda's active mind had whirled away to another subject.

"I've bought a bottle of the most heavenly bath salts for Mandy's birthday on Saturday. And that reminds me, Sal. You're coming to the party, of course?"

Sally grinned.

"I haven't been asked."

"Don't be ridiculous. Mandy forgot to send you a formal invitation, but you know we never have a party without you. I do hope the fine weather will last so that we can have it in the garden. Tony's going to fix up the radiogram so that we can dance on the lawn."

Sally's eyes twinkled.

"Mrs. Ryan will put up with the noise because of Tony, but Miss Hallam, on the other side, will have a blue fit. You'd better ask her to come as well. I'd like to see her doing the Samba."

The two girls giggled at the mental picture of the dignified old lady in a modern dance. Then Linda said contritely:

"But we really shouldn't laugh. Miss Hallam's a dear and awfully nice to us. She sends in lovely things to eat when we're ill and remembers our birthdays.

She's rather a lonely person and I go in sometimes to talk to her or to play the piano. Look, Sal, we mustn't stop to talk. We've got such a lot to get in tonight."

Saturday came, a fair sunny morning with Mandy, the heroine of the occasion, opening presents at the breakfast-table.

"The broolly's elegant, Daddy. Thanks awfully. And, Mummy, I love the handbag. And just look at these pretty hankies Miss Hallam has sent. I must go in and thank her presently. . . ."

After breakfast the whole of the Carrell family went into the garden and anxiously scanned the blue skies for rain-clouds. None were visible and they felt it reasonably safe to begin preparations for the afternoon. Mandy, in blue cotton jeans and a bright check blouse, looked cool and attractive and ready for work. It was, however, the others who did most of the work while Mandy gave orders.

"Fasten that wire well out of the way, Tony, or someone will trip over it. And, Linda, there must be some more deck-chairs in the garage, surely? Well, can't we borrow some? Here you are, Dad, you were going to make up the clues for the treasure hunt. . . ."

"Is Jacqueline coming?" Linda reappeared from her search of the garage dragging two rather dilapidated deck-chairs.

"Yes, and Joe, too. He wanted to know if we couldn't have an American barbecue, but I told him we'd nothing to roast on a spit even if we had one and he'd have to be content with sandwiches and sausage-rolls and things like the rest of us. Dad, do you think you could make this little table reasonably safe?"

Mr. Carrell threw up his hands in a despairing gesture.

"One thing at a time, for pity's sake! I've only one pair of hands."

"But such clever ones," Mandy told him in tones of honeyed flattery, and kissed the tip of his nose.

Then she bustled away to direct Jill's progress as she staggered across the lawn with a pile of cushions to soften the improvised plank seats which were dotted about the garden.

"You can't put those down yet, child. The planks will have to be dusted first. Get something from Mummy, there's a good girl."

Jill dumped the cushions on the grass and trotted off obediently towards the house. Mandy suddenly gave an exclamation.

"Linda, I've just remembered! I didn't go in to thank Miss Hallam for the hankies. And I won't have a chance this afternoon. I suppose I'll have to go today?"

"Yes, you will," contributed Mrs. Carrell from just behind her. "You know what a store the old lady sets by such little attentions. But you can't go like that." She glanced meaningly at the blue jeans and Mandy frowned.

"Oh, Mummy, how silly!"

"Perhaps. But it won't take you a minute to slip on a cotton dress instead, dear. . . ."

With a despairing glance at her mother Mandy moved towards the house, looking less than her eighteen years with a rebellious expression on her face. A few minutes later, however, now fresh and charming in cool blue print, she was shown into the room which Miss Hallam still referred to as the drawing-room. Old Lizzie, the maid, had been with the Hallam family in the Colonel's time and was almost as much a throw-back as the old lady herself.

"Sit down, Miss Mandy," she said, drawing the thick brocade curtains aside a few inches to let a thin shaft of sunlight brighten the gloom. "I'll tell the mistress you're here. She will be pleased to see you."

Mandy sat on the edge of a straight-backed chair whose seat was covered with slippery satin in a particularly hideous shade of maroon. The flowered wallpaper, the heavy furniture, the knick-knacks on the corner bracket all spoke of other days and the slightly musty smell had a depressing effect. Mandy sighed. How dreadful to have to live always in a house like this!

And then the door opened and Miss Hallam came in. Above the parchment-coloured face her white hair was parted in the middle and drawn smoothly back behind her ears into a small bun. The long black dress with its high neck and under petticoats made her seem to glide rather than walk.

"My dear." For a moment the wrinkled cheek lay against Mandy's fresh young face. "How nice to see you!"

Mandy felt a warm rush of contrition. It suddenly seemed rather awful that she only paid the old lady visits in return for gifts. She would honestly try and pop in sometimes, as Linda did.

"The hankies were simply sweet, Miss Hallam. It was so nice of you to remember my birthday."

Miss Hallam smoothed the front of her skirt and said gently:

"It gives me pleasure to remember. Let me see, you must be seventeen now?"

"Eighteen. . . . It's Linda who will be seventeen in November."

"Dear me! How you girls do grow up! I can

remember when your dear mother took you out in your perambulator for the first time." Miss Hallam's eyes held a faraway expression. "The Colonel was very ill and I was watching from the window. . . ."

The old lady always referred to her father as the Colonel. He had been ninety-four when he died and was still a hero in his daughter's eyes. Mandy suddenly wondered in which of the wars he had been a hero, and snatched wildly in her mind after dates. But it was no good. She simply could not place him.

Searching for another topic of conversation she was relieved when Miss Hallam broke the silence.

"So Linda will be seventeen next birthday? I thought the child younger. Such a fine musician, dear Linda. I count it a privilege when she finds the time to play to me. I prefer the piano, of course, but she seems to be interested in her clarinet."

Mandy laughed.

"And we all suffer! I mean, when she's practising. And now she wants another clarinet. Says you have to have two, or something."

"And do they cost a great deal?" Miss Hallam's voice was gravely interested.

"Twenty pounds or more, and that's second-hand. Isn't it awful?" Mandy paused and wondered what else she could talk about. Oh yes, of course, the party. And she plunged into a description of the plans for the afternoon.

"So if you hear lots of noise I do hope you'll forgive us for once," she finished sweetly, and in spite of her resolve not to rush away, found herself snatching at the excuse. "You'll forgive me, too, if I don't stay very long now? There's such a lot to do."

Miss Hallam rose at once and put out her hand.

"Of course. Run along, my dear. It's nice to see you if only for a short time. Remember me to your mother. And to Linda. Tell her I'm looking forward to hearing her play again as soon as she can spare time."

Mandy kissed the wrinkled cheek again.

"Good-bye. Thank you awfully again for the lovely hankies. . . ."

She waved again at the doorway and sped through the hall, not waiting for Lizzie to show her out. With a little sigh of relief she ran back to their own garden, fanning her face in mock exhaustion when she saw Linda.

"Oh well, that's over, thank goodness. She's sweet, I know, but I can never think of anything to talk about."

Linda raised her eyebrows in puzzled surprise.

"Can't you? Oh, I just talk about anything. Miss Hallam specially likes the funny bits."

Mandy looked startled, then a little crestfallen. She said almost defiantly:

"Oh well, it's easy for you. You can always play the piano when the conversation lags."

That afternoon the garden at number twenty-three was a gay sight. Against the background of summer flowers there were the colourful dresses of the girls and even the boys sported bright blazers and showy ties. The chatter of young voices and bursts of laughter caused Mr. Carrell to remark jokingly as he helped Mrs. Carrell in the kitchen:

"Sounds like the parrot house at the Zoo, eh, my dear?"

"Don't be rude," she rebuked him mockingly, "and take these jellies into the lounge for now, will you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Mr. Carrell replied meekly.

Mandy, as usual, was surrounded by a solid phalanx of young men, all vying for her attention. With little screams of delight and polite protests that "they really shouldn't", she opened small parcels containing sweets, chocolates, cosmetics and other dainty gifts. Joe Carter came in for a special burst of gratitude as he produced an outsize box of candy.

"Thought you'd like a few sweets," he said gruffly, and no one but his sister knew that it represented the sale of a precious collection of stamps.

Linda, seeing Jacqueline standing by herself and looking a little out of it, pounced on her with an extra warmth of welcome.

"I'm so glad you could come. And—if you'll excuse me remarking on it—what a lovely frock!"

Linda eyed Jacqueline's heavy white silk with admiration. Cut gracefully in a deceptively simple style it had a beauty of line which made some of the other girls' dresses appear fussy and overtrimmed. Jacqueline's face showed first pleasure, then sadness at the compliment.

"Mummy made it. . . ." she said. "She was awfully clever that way."

Yes, her mother had made it for the concert at the end of her last term at school. To Jacqueline it seemed now like another life altogether. Suddenly she wished she had not come to the party. It was all right for Joe. He didn't care; at least he didn't care about the kind of things she did or mind because this happy family of the Carrells showed up their own bereft state. For a moment Jacqueline contemplated flight, but Linda, watching her and sensing with her quick perception something of what was going through the

other girl's mind, seized Jacqueline's arm and pulled her forward towards another group.

"You must meet Sally. She's my greatest friend at school. Sal, this is Jacqueline, who is at the Art School with Mandy. And this is Frances, and Dilys . . . and Joan. You met Graham the other evening, didn't you? Graham, look after Jacqueline, won't you? We're going to start the Treasure Hunt and we're pairing up for that. Here's the first clue. . . ."

Graham threw a quick glance in Mandy's direction, but it was obvious that he stood no chance there with so many clamouring for her attention. Well, here was a very attractive substitute. He smiled at Jacqueline and, holding out the slip of paper Linda had given him, asked:

"What do you make of this? We have to solve it and then take what we find to Mr. Carrell and he will give us the next clue."

Jackie scrutinized the slip and read out the words with a puzzled expression.

"*'If you can reach to haul it down, it might make a victor's crown'*. . . . Heavens, I don't know. . . ."

"Well, we'll have to find out. Look, Mr. Carrell has given the signal to start."

There was a last scramble to pair up. Linda, looking about for Tony, saw his rough fair head bent industriously over the clue with Mandy's golden curls very close beside him. For a moment Linda felt rather hurt, then she told herself that it was, after all, Mandy's party. She could choose whom she would and of course Tony would have to obey. But . . . oh well, perhaps Mandy was trying to make one of the other boys jealous or something.

With a resigned sigh Linda adopted as her partner

a plain fat boy with glasses whom they had been forced to ask because even with Mandy's popularity it was always difficult to get enough boys when you were a family of girls.

"Come on. I believe I have an idea about this first clue. . . ."

She clutched at his hand and dragged him down the side path and into the front garden where one or two others had been smitten with the same bright thought and were already rifling a laurel bush for their bit of the "victor's crown".

Up and down the garden they raced, getting clues and solving them, then dashing back to Mr. Carrell with the evidence which would qualify them to receive the next slip of paper. Mandy and Tony beat Jacqueline and Graham by a very short head, and Mandy was good-naturedly derided as she and Tony went up to Mrs. Carrell to receive their prizes.

"I bet you helped your father with the clues!"

"Honestly, I didn't. Did I, Dad?"

"It was all due to my brains," declared Tony modestly.

When tea was over there were more games and presently, as the shadows lengthened across the grass, the radiogram was turned on and the young people danced.

Jill, yawning behind her hand so that her mother should not see and dispatch her off to bed, was lolling against the radiogram as her father changed the records. Though reluctant to leave, she was now a little tired of the party and the thrill of being allowed to be present at such a grown-up function was a trifle dimmed. Suddenly her expression became impish, and behind her father's back she pulled out a wire

at the back of the radio. Impulsively, she had meant it for a bit of fun, but the effect was disastrous. Neither her father's efforts, nor those of other wireless experts among the boys could restart the music, and Jill fled in a flood of tears to her mother's side.

"I didn't really mean to do it, Mummy," she wailed.

Her mother put her arms round the small sobbing figure, but her voice was rather stern.

"It was very naughty, Jill. But never mind. I expect they'll get it right in a minute."

Mandy, passing, flashed Jill a fierce glance and muttered:

"It's the very last time I shall allow a child of your age to come to one of *my* parties. . . ."

"Oh, Mandy, I'm very sorry. . . ."

"Sorry . . .!" Mandy gave her small sister a withering look and swept on toward the scene of the trouble, her cheeks pink with anger.

Jill sidled over to Linda and, inserting a warm little hand into hers, whispered chokily:

"I didn't mean to do anything bad, Lindy. I didn't. It just came over me to do it, all of a sudden. . . ."

Linda bent down to the child and hugged her. Somehow she always found it hard to be cross with Jill.

"Don't worry, pet. Daddy's trying very hard to get it right."

But he couldn't. No amount of coaxing could locate the exact trouble, which Mr. Carrell declared at last was probably nothing to do with what Jill had done at all. Linda, watching the cloud on Mandy's face and the gloom that threatened to spoil the party, had a sudden idea. She ran across the garden to Tony, and whispered:

"I don't think they'd be able to hear the piano in the garden if I played in the lounge, but if I played my clarinet out here and you had your fiddle . . .?"

Tony caught on at once and Linda, gathering a pile of popular dance music from the cabinet, soon set up the stands outside. In a few minutes the atmosphere had regained its former gaiety. As Linda and Tony began to play, Joe Carter seized Mandy around the waist and whirled her into a quickstep, while other couples followed suit.

"If only Martin Grant and Clare Truett could see us now!"

Linda giggled and set a waltz up on the stand. A warm feeling of contentment flowed over her as Tony grinned and lifted his fiddle again to his chin. This was something they could do . . . together . . . and no one else could interrupt.

"Of course I don't mind," she assured someone who seemed to feel sorry for her because she wouldn't be able to dance. "Why, I'd just as soon, really . . ."

Presently Sally wandered over and, picking up one of the trays which had been left about after tea, she began to beat out the rhythm on it with a stick.

Linda threw her a laughing glance.

"I say, Sally, if only our Youth Orchestra could get hold of some tymps, we'd rope you in!"



## CHAPTER FIVE

### ANXIETIES

"THERE you are, Jill." Linda gave the final tweak to the bows she was tying on the end of her young sister's plaits. "You go down to breakfast. I'll be there just as soon as I've given Mandy a call."

Left alone, Linda picked up the brush again and smoothed the dark fringe above her eyebrows. Glancing at her reflection at first casually and then with a curious intentness it was as if for a moment she saw herself as she might be one day, when school clothes would be discarded for ever.

She would never wear green again, but clear arresting blues and reds that would give warmth to her rather pale complexion. And she would have all her dresses made with tight-fitting bodices and full skirts that would make her look less angular. Of course

she could never hope to hold a candle to Mandy, but perhaps she wouldn't be so bad-looking, after all.

Then the corners of Linda's mouth lifted slightly at her own foolishness. Whatever was she doing at eight o'clock in the morning, thinking about the future when the present was so demanding? She spun round from the glass swiftly and darted across the landing to Mandy's room where she beat a loud tattoo on the door before throwing it open.

"Eight o'clock, Mandy! Gracious, and you're not even out of bed!"

Advancing towards her elder sister's prone figure she dragged the bedclothes off her with a merciless tug. "It's no good scolding. You *told* me to do this."

Mandy sat up, her hair curling round her small head like a golden cloud, her expression first bemused and indignant, then resigned.

"Oh . . . Linda . . ." She yawned dismally and stretched her arms above her head. "Eight o'clock, did you say? I suppose I had better get up."

In spite of her words her hand began to feel for the bedclothes again but Linda forestalled her ruthlessly.

"Oh no, you don't! Look, I'm leaving you now. I can't spare any more time."

Linda dashed out of the room again and down the stairs to the dining-room, taking her place at the table which had been set in the sunny alcove by the window.

"Good morning, darlings," she greeted her parents cheerfully. "Pass the 'flakes, Jilly, please." Attacking cereal with zest she rattled on: "Just fancy! That lazy wretch Mandy wasn't even awake! Good thing the

Art School doesn't begin until nine-thirty and that there's no Headmistress to point out *her* duty as a Prefect. Oh well, only five more days to this term and then six glorious weeks of holiday. And we'll be off to the sea on Saturday . . .!"

She paused, suddenly aware that she was receiving little response. Looking searchingly from her mother's face to her father's she noticed their serious expressions.

"Mummy . . . Daddy . . . is there something wrong?" she asked almost fearfully.

"Don't look so anxious, child," Mrs. Carrell smiled reassuringly across the table. "It isn't as bad as that. But I was trying to get an opportunity of telling you that Dad's leaving for the North of England just as soon as he can get away this morning."

"Leaving . . . for the North . . . ?" Linda's eyes searched her parents' faces again. "But why . . .?"

"An emergency in connection with one of our factories, dear," Mr. Carrell told her. "I didn't know about it until late last night so it's still a bit of a shock to me. And I don't know many details."

"Oh . . ." Linda continued her breakfast, digesting the news along with a piece of toast which tasted surprisingly like sawdust. The house never seemed the same on the few occasions Dad had been away without them. But he would be back. . . . So why this peculiar sense of depression that was causing such a horrid feeling in her stomach? She looked up suddenly. "It doesn't mean that you won't be able to come on holiday with us, Dad?" she asked quickly, her voice rising in horror at the thought.

She saw her mother's struggle to keep her smile and her father's taut expression and realized that it was

what they had been trying to tell her. There was a tense silence. Above the rim of her teacup Jill's eyes were round and wondering and very near to tears.

The door opened and Mandy came into the room. Linda burst out on a wail:

"Hear this, Mandy! Dad isn't coming with us on Saturday!"

Mandy glanced from one to the other swiftly. Of course they were joking? Then the smile left her face and she crossed to her father's side.

"Dad, you can't mean it! But why. . .?"

Mr. Carrell repeated a little wearily:

"Business, my dear. It's a bit of bad luck for us all, but things have gone very much wrong at one of our Northern factories and in the Directors' opinion I'm the man to put things right."

"But, Dad, don't they know that you were going on holiday? That everything was booked up?"

"They know. But I don't suppose the Directors think that is so important as their own affairs." For a moment Mr. Carrell permitted himself a smile, then his face sobered again. "It's a great disappointment for us all, but it comes hardest on your mother, and I look to you girls to make things as easy as you can for her."

He trod a little heavily towards the door. It had scarcely closed behind him before Mandy burst out petulantly:

"It's not fair! The holiday won't be half so much fun without Dad. I do think the firm have been unreasonable. He ought to have insisted on taking his holiday. After all, he works for it all the year round. Don't you think so, Lin?"

"Well . . ." began Linda. Supposedly Dad would have refused if he could. They didn't have to be told how much he, too, looked forward to their annual holiday by the sea. She saw a brief mental picture of him in his old sports coat and grey flannels, playing cricket on the sands, his face sun-bronzed and laughing as he tried to take one of the peculiar throws that Mummy optimistically termed "bowling". She glanced at her mother's face now. The little smile on her face looked as if it had been willed to stay fixed. As Dad said, it was hardest on Mummy, who looked forward all the year to having her husband's company. Mandy was still grumbling on and on. Linda interrupted crisply:

"We'll have to make the best of it. In any case, I'd better get a move on or I'll be late. Come on, Jill."

Jill got slowly off her chair, her round face flushed and sober. Since the older girl who had been taking her to school moved away, it was Linda's job each morning to see her younger sister across the main road on her way to the preparatory school she attended. The two of them went upstairs together to say good-bye to their father, who was sorting out some of the things he would want with him. Linda did her best to sound cheerful.

"Look after yourself, darling, and send us lots of letters if you can find the time. We'll write to you, too—every day. And you'll be back by the time we are, won't you?"

"Maybe . . ." Mr. Carrell kissed Linda affectionately and gently disengaged Jill's clinging arms from about his neck. "And take care of yourselves, my dears. Cheer up, Jill! There are worse troubles at sea . . . or

rather, there'll still be fun at the sea," he added jokingly, trying to win a smile from the little girl.

"I've got a pain," Jill told him earnestly.

Linda laughed and took her small sister's hand.

"Oh, come on, Jill. That won't stop him going. And do hurry up. You're going to be awfully late if you don't."

A few minutes later she was striding along the road at a sharp pace, Jill's short sturdy legs jogging beside her unevenly. They crossed the main road and Linda waved good-bye, hardening her heart at Jill's woe-begone expression. It was just as bad for all of them and it *was* better to try to make the best of it.

Joining Sally at the next corner she told her the bad news, adding guiltily:

"Poor old Jill went off looking so fed up. I'm afraid I wasn't as nice to her as I might have been, but I was feeling in the need of sympathy myself."

"She'll probably have got over it a bit by the time she comes home," Sally said consolingly. "But it's rotten luck for you all. I'm so sorry."

Leaving Sally that afternoon at her own gate Linda said:

"I'm going in at once. I expect Mummy's feeling a bit bleak. . . ."

But when she beat her usual tattoo on the knocker it was not her mother who came to open it, but Mrs. Ryan, of all people. And there was something about their next-door neighbour's important expression that told Linda at once that something was wrong. Involuntarily the thought crossed her mind that, if it was something horrible, she'd rather it wasn't Mrs. Ryan who had to tell her.

"Linda dear . . ." she was saying now in a soothing voice. And then she paused. . . .

"Where's Mother?" asked Linda abruptly, and it seemed an age before Mrs. Ryan admitted reluctantly:

"She's at the hospital, dear. Look, I've made you a nice cup of tea. Come and drink it. Your sister Mandy will be home in a moment."

"I don't want any tea. I want to know what's the matter with Mummy," Linda said almost rudely. She couldn't help it. Obviously Mrs. Ryan was trying to be kind, but only a person with no imagination at all would drag it out like this. "*Please . . .*" she added urgently.

"It's not your mother. It's poor little Jill. . . ."

"Jill? What's happened to her?" Oh, how long was this going on?

"Well, she was sent home from school this afternoon in pain, and the doctor said her appendix must be removed at once. The ambulance took her off to the Memorial Hospital and your mother's going to stay until it's over."

Linda sat down on a chair with a little thud. Relief was now mixed with her fear. Appendicitis. Hundreds of people had their appendixes out and were none the worse for it. But Jill was such a kid. . . . With a feeling of remorse Linda remembered her little sister's miserable expression when she left her that morning. She had said she had a pain. And she, Linda, had actually laughed! Unthinking fool that she was. . . .

"And Dad?" Linda said faintly.

"Your father had gone, of course. He went on the twelve o'clock train. Your mother was in quite a state wondering if she should telegraph him to come back."

Of course. Mummy wouldn't want to make Dad anxious just when he should have all his mind centred on the job he had been sent away to do. Without realizing that it had no sugar in it Linda absent-mindedly drank a cup of strong tea and tried not to listen to Mrs. Ryan's high-pitched voice going on and on. But it was no good.

"I said to your mother, 'It's at times like this you realize what a man's support means.' Of course, I've had to do without it for a long, long time and no one knows what I've gone through, what with my headaches and insomnia and having to worry about Tony's health all on my own. . . ."

If only Tony would come, or Mandy, thought Linda desperately. And then the gate clicked and she glanced out of the window. Here was Mandy now! Linda ran to the front door, forestalling Mrs. Ryan, who was obviously going to adopt the same tactics of "news-breaking" as she had done with her.

Almost before Mandy reached the door Linda was telling her breathlessly:

"Mandy . . . Jill's got appendicitis and Mother's with her at the hospital. But I expect it's going to be all right. Lots of people have them out and think nothing of it. . . ."

So anxious was Linda that Mandy should not be subjected to the same slow torture she had been forced to endure, that the words simply poured out of her in a rush. Only when she saw Mandy's white face did she realize that her own shock tactics were almost as bad.

"Here . . ." she said, pushing her sister into the hall chair. "I'll get you a cup of tea."

Rushing back to the dining-room she poured out

a cup with shaking hands and took it to Mandy. Mrs. Ryan was stilling her by making soothing noises. She threw a look of reproach at Linda.

"It was very foolish of you, child, to blurt it out like that. I was specially careful to break the news to your father gently. . . ."

Linda's eyes met Mandy's. The amused twinkle in the latter's showed that Mandy understood just how cruel Mrs. Ryan had been. And now here was Tony coming in at the open front door, and although Mrs. Ryan's voice droned on with tragic-sounding explanations, everything suddenly seemed brighter and more normal.

"What rotten luck for poor old Jill! Still, it's sure to be all right. A chap in my form had it this term and he was back and playing cricket in just over three weeks."

It was extraordinary how Tony's matter-of-fact reception of the news put everything into perspective again. The Ryans stayed with Mandy and Linda and tea was a more cheerful meal than Linda would have thought possible half an hour before. All the same, there was a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach when she imagined Jill lying white and still on the operating table under all those bright lights. The surgeon and the nurses would wear white gowns and masks, she supposed, just as they had in that film they had seen last week. . . .

Time and again Linda turned her mind away from the picture and she was grateful for Tony who, she knew, was clowning specially for their benefit.

The shrill summons of the telephone-bell made them all jump. Linda leaped to her feet and rushed to lift the receiver.

"Yes . . . ? Yes . . . ? No, this is Linda. I'll get her for you, Graham."

Almost fiercely Linda scowled at her sister as she passed over the receiver.

"It's for you, Mandy. For heaven's sake don't take too long. . . ."

It was agony listening to the one-sided conversation, knowing all the time that their mother might be trying to get through.

"No, Graham . . . sorry, I can't possibly. My kid sister—Jill, you know—she's ill in hospital. Yes . . . appendicitis. We're waiting to hear now. . . ."

"Yes, we are. . . ." muttered Linda crossly, and Tony said soothingly:

"Easy, old thing."

Mandy replaced the receiver and the waiting began again. Once Linda decided the 'phone must have gone dead, but when she lifted the instrument the dialling tone was there as usual.

And then the front door clicked again and they heard the sounds of quickly moving feet. Tony sprang to the window.

"It's your mother!"

They were all at the door to greet her and Linda knew at once by her mother's quiet smiling nod that everything had gone well.

"The operation was quite successful and she's sleeping comfortably," Mrs. Carrell told them, sinking into a chair. "There was just time to catch a train so I thought I wouldn't waste minutes trying to telephone. And I've telegraphed to Daddy."

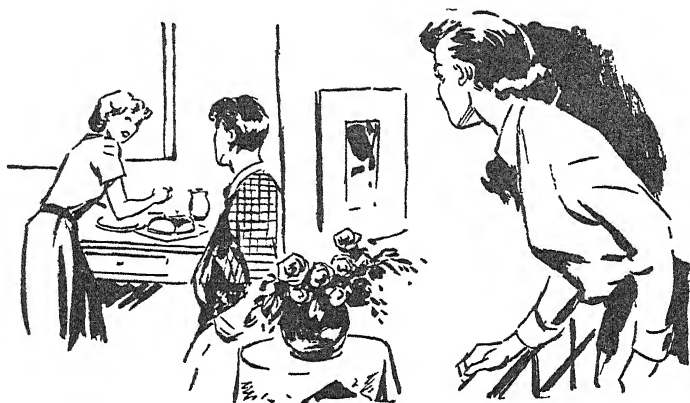
"I'll put the kettle on for another cup of tea," Linda volunteered, finding relief in action.

It was only as she filled the kettle with cold water

under the tap that the thought struck her for the first time.

First Daddy, and now Jill. . . . With two of the family out of the running it was pretty obvious that the holiday they had planned was doomed.

They wouldn't be able to go at all now!



## CHAPTER SIX

### ON HER OWN

"BUT of course we understand. You couldn't possibly be so far away with Jill in hospital here," Linda told her mother when the inevitable blow fell. "In any case, it wouldn't have been the same this year, without Dad."

"No, it wouldn't. Everything's beastly," Mandy contributed gloomily, adding with a sigh: "But it's going to be deadly dull here. Practically everyone we know will be away. Graham, Jacqueline and Joe. And you, Tony. . . ."

Linda threw her sister a reproachful look. It was certainly a bit of extra bad luck that Tony and his mother would be touring Devonshire for the next two weeks and that a lot of their friends would be away at the same time. But as she pointed out to Mandy

later in the kitchen while they cut sandwiches and made coffee so that the two mothers could rest and chat:

"We've got to try and keep Mummy cheerful, so for heaven's sake don't keep on saying how awful it is about the holiday."

"Well, it is awful." Mandy spiked savagely at a tomato. "But I won't say it any more."

Tony grinned and waved his knife at Linda with an admonitory gesture.

"It'll be a good opportunity for you to do loads of practice, my girl."

Linda made a face at him and Mandy said rudely:

"Good heavens, don't we hear enough now of her tooting and fluting? Have a heart, Tony!"

She pouted her pretty mouth at him and gazed at him so appealingly that he had to laugh.

"It's quite a nice noise," Linda asserted with offended dignity. "Anyway, I'd as soon hear someone practising the clarinet as the violin. All that squeaking."

But neither of her two listeners bothered to answer. They were too busy sparring with each other now over the making of the coffee. When the door-bell rang Mandy said promptly:

"See who it is, Linda, there's a dear, while I watch the milk."

Feeling dismissed, Linda went through the hall and opened the door to Jacqueline Carter. Jacqueline was looking happier these days and the brooding look descended only rarely. Now her face was alight and eager and under her arm she carried a portfolio bursting with drawings.

"Hallo, Linda! I really came to see your mother. She wanted to see my things. . . ."

Linda hesitated, then drew Jacqueline into the hall and lowered her voice.

"I don't know whether she'll want to be bothered with that this evening, old thing. Jill's in hospital with appendicitis. It's been the rottenest day. First Dad had to go up North on business and desert us for the holiday. And now this. . . . We won't be going away at all now, of course."

Jacqueline's bright face clouded.

"Oh, I'm sorry . . . I wouldn't have come if I'd known. Please give my love to your mother and tell her——"

"What's all this whispering?" interrupted Mrs. Carrell smilingly, coming out of the lounge suddenly. "Why, hallo, Jacqueline. Is that some of your work you've brought to show me? Good. I've been looking forward to seeing it. Come along in. You know Mrs. Ryan, don't you?"

Jacqueline murmured a greeting and said awkwardly.

"I guess you don't want me butting in with these now, Mrs. Carrell. I could bring them another time. I'm so terribly sorry about Jill. . . ."

Mrs. Carrell put her arm through the girl's and led her over to the window-seat.

"Of course you're to stay. We're just going to have some coffee. Bring an extra cup, Linda."

"Of course. And I'll hurry those two up. Goodness knows why they're being so long," Linda said, going back to the kitchen.

Mandy and Tony were very close together by the table and the milk boiled over just as she came into

the room. Linda rushed to the stove and drew the saucepan away from the flame.

"Of all the idiots!" she exclaimed exasperatedly. "Really, Tony, you might have kept your eye on it. You know what Mandy is."

"Well, I had my eye on *her* and I thought that was the next best thing. I see now," he grinned at Mandy, who, with pink cheeks and ruffled hair, giggled naughtily, "how very wrong I was."

"Oh, you make me tired, both of you," muttered Linda crossly, pouring the hot milk into a jug and setting it down on the tray beside the coffee-pot with a little thud. With heightened colour and lifted head she turned her back and ladled sugar into a dish. Why should she care if Mandy and Tony were getting even more friendly? She didn't care. Of course she didn't.

Mrs. Ryan had gone into the hall to make a 'phone call and Mrs. Carrell was sitting on the window-seat beside Jacqueline, turning over the drawings and paintings in the portfolio with an interested and almost excited expression.

"But these are good . . . really good, my dear! You have a real talent." She picked up a small watercolour painting which showed a tall slim woman at the gate of a house. She was shading her eyes against the sun and looking down the road with an eager expression. "This is one of the best. . . ."

"It's my mother. . . ." For a moment Jacqueline's face clouded, then she said eagerly, "Then you don't think I'm wasting my time?"

"Indeed I don't." Mrs. Carrell's eyes rested on the girl thoughtfully. "Has your aunt seen these?"

Jacqueline nodded.

"Yes . . . oh, she thinks they're good too, but she

doesn't understand. I mean, she thinks Art is just a nice little hobby one can work at in one's spare time. But I don't want you to think I'm running down Aunt Margaret because of that." Jacqueline's expression was earnest. "I think I'm beginning to understand her better now. She wants to be kind, but she isn't artistic herself. And I think it's been an awful upheaval in her household having us to live there after it being just she and Uncle all these years. . . ."

Mrs. Carrell was still turning over the paintings, and now she said slowly:

"Don't let yourself get discouraged, Jacqueline, and I'm sure you'll win out in the end. You have talent and you have . . . youth. I find it in my heart almost to envy you. . . ." She smiled. "Now don't run away with the idea that I regret anything for myself. I had my small triumphs and perhaps I've done my share of creating in other ways."

Her glance fell affectionately on Mandy and Linda as they came into the room, then she gave a little sigh. Jacqueline guessed she was thinking about Jill. She gave Mrs. Carrell's hand a quick, warm pressure.

"Don't worry. I'm sure Jill is going to be all right. . . .

When Jacqueline had gone the others sat on, chatting, and presently Mrs. Carrell suggested:

"Tony, what about some music? I'd like to hear that new Sonata again."

Tony cocked an enquiring eye at Linda. He was always quite unselfconscious about his music. In a few minutes they were ready and the lovely sounds poured out into the room. Mrs. Ryan sat on the edge of her chair, one heavily ringed hand tapping her knee, her expression proud but a little strained, as if too anxious that her son's performance should be appreciated.

Mrs. Carrell sat relaxed and soothed, leaning back against the cushions with her eyes closed. As the last note of music died away she said softly:

"That was lovely, Tony. Thank you, Linda dear."

Mrs. Ryan stood up. The complaining note had returned to her voice.

"Come, Tony, I shall be a wreck in the morning."

Mrs. Carrell's expression became concerned.

"Oh, I do hope not. I shall feel that it's our fault. And you've been so kind. . . ."

"It was nothing." All that was best in Mrs. Ryan rose to the surface again and she pressed Mrs. Carrell's hand. "I was glad to be of some use. Good-bye, my dear; I should take a couple of aspirins before you go to bed. They will help you to sleep. Come, Tony."

Obediently, Tony gathered up his violin case and his music and held the door open for his mother. His eyes seemed to be searching for Mandy but she had gone to answer the telephone again. Almost as soon as the door closed on the Ryans she came dancing back, her face alight with excitement.

"Mummy . . . that was Jacqueline! She told her aunt about us not being able to go away and they've invited me to go to Devonshire with them. They've rented a furnished bungalow and there's room for me. Do say it's all right if I go."

Linda gave a startled gasp. How *could* Mandy bear to be away just now? As if Mandy read her younger sister's thought, her face fell and her tone became apologetic.

"Of course, I realize it would mean leaving you and Linda on your own, but . . . well, it isn't as if I can *do* anything about Jill, is it? And Jacqueline is so amazed

and delighted about her aunt giving the invitation. . . . But if you really think——”

Mrs. Carrell's hesitation had been only momentary.

“Why, of course you must go. That is, if you're quite sure you're welcome. . . .”

“Oh, honestly, Jacqueline made it seem like that. But, anyway, Mrs. Marshall is going to write to you, and Jacqueline will bring the note round in the morning.”

So it was all finally settled the very next day. The report from the hospital was still satisfactory and Mandy, at her very sweetest, declared herself ready to *slave* for her mother and Linda for the short time she would still be with them. The other two laughed at her and continued quietly with the usual routine and found, as they had expected, that Mandy's own preparations took up all of her time and some of theirs.

It was difficult for Linda to think of Mandy's chance without any envy at all, but she did her best. In any case, she told herself, she and her mother would have lots of fun together, not bothering about anything formal and having picnic meals.

All the same she did feel a little bleak when Mandy at last went off in a whirl of excitement. The house seemed so quiet and more than ever Linda missed Jill and the little things she was used to doing for her. Every afternoon her mother went off to the hospital and she could not even go with her, for the rule was “parents only”. So Linda stayed behind writing long letters to her father and to Sally. Then there was her music practice and household chores and shopping and visits to Miss Hallam, next door. Yes, she was busy enough, but a little bored and looking forward to

the time when things would be gayer and more normal: when the Youth Orchestra would begin practising again.

Soon there was the usual postcard from Tony in which she could read that he, too, was a little bored. She could imagine that Mrs. Ryan would be somewhat demanding even on holiday, and expect Tony to dance perpetual attendance on her. There was a long letter from Sally, telling of her holiday doings and a very short ecstatic one from Mandy, which still managed to include references to Joe and some other boys with whom she and Jacqueline were having a marvellous time.

*. . . Jacqueline's aunt, Mrs. Marshall, is much nicer than I expected, and she's thawing out a little more each day. I guess she's sort of needed young people around her and hasn't realized it. . . .*

It was in the second week following Mandy's departure that Linda met Martin Grant in the High Street. She was wandering aimlessly along with her shopping basket when she recognized his tall thin figure coming towards her. She blushed rosily as he lifted his hat and would have hurried by with only a murmured greeting had he not stopped her and said in the friendliest way:

"Hallo, Linda! So you're one of the select few who haven't gone on holiday?"

She nodded shyly. She was still a little in awe of this gifted young man.

"Our holiday was all messed up. First, my father had to go away on business and then my little sister was ill. . . ."

"Bad luck!" Martin paused outside a small restaurant and smiled at Linda. "It's awfully hot, isn't it. I was just going to indulge in an ice cream. Would you keep me company?"

Linda hesitated. Her mother had gone to the hospital and wouldn't be back for at least two hours and she was tired of being alone. Almost to her surprise she found that she had accepted Martin's offer and was following him up the stairs to a big room overlooking the street where they took a table by the window.

"Hallo . . .!" said Martin, "there's another friend of ours. Come over and join us, Johnny."

Linda nodded at Johnny Vernon a little awkwardly as he took the seat opposite her. Because of Tony's dislike she had had little to do with this tall fair-haired boy, whose father owned the hall in which they practised. Now she found herself rather liking him. Especially when he said gloomily:

"You're Tony Ryan's friend, aren't you? By jove, he plays well! I'd give my back teeth to play half as well."

"You've got a lovely violin. . . ." Linda's eyes twinkled and Johnny laughed.

"That's it. Rub it in. I'm not all that bad, am I, Martin?"

"Well . . ." said Martin, grinning so boyishly that Linda decided he couldn't be nearly so old as she had placed him at first. Under thirty, she thought now. . . .

They sat chatting quite a while over their ice creams, though it was Martin and Johnny who did most of the talking. Linda found herself wondering why Tony had quite such a down on Johnny. Spoiled at home he might be, but there were nice things about

him; his unstinted praise of Tony and his good-natured acceptance of his own lack of ability, for instance.

"Well, this won't do," said Martin at last. "I've a lesson early this afternoon so I'd better be getting along. Nothing to stop you two sitting there as long as you like, if you've the time though. I'll pay the bill on the way out."

His blue eyes twinkled at them again, but Linda stood up hastily. She didn't want Johnny to think he was saddled with her for the afternoon. The three of them walked along the street together and at the corner Martin paused.

"I turn off here. By the way, I'm taking Clare Truett down to Dryslake tomorrow. I have to give a lecture at the Summer School there. Like to come along for the drive, either of you?"

Linda's eyes sparkled eagerly. Mummy wouldn't mind being left for just one day. And she'd read about the Summer School. They had it every year. A whole week of music with classes and concerts and lectures. . . .

"Oh, please . . . I'd love to."

"Count me in too if you can manage it, sir," Johnny said quickly.

"Right. I'll be going round to Clare's later today and I can let you have further details about time, etcetera. I'll either 'phone you or pop in with a message, Linda. Moreton Avenue, isn't it?"

"Yes . . . twenty-three. Thanks awfully for the ice cream . . . and everything. . . ."

Martin waved and strode away while Johnny and Linda walked along together. Johnny asked idly:

"What's this Summer School affair? Sounds pretty

dull to me, but I thought I might as well come along as I've nothing better to do."

For a moment Linda knew what Tony had meant. There was something rather infuriating in Johnny's attitude to life, as if all the world was offered to him on a plate and he could casually select those things which appealed to him, without any trouble. She said rather crossly:

"It's a week organized for young people with musical interests. And if you thought it was dull, why did you say you'd come?"

"I told you," Johnny's good humour was unruffled. "I've nothing better to do."

"I've got to go into this shop so I'll say good-bye," said Linda rather shortly.

Martin Grant came round that evening about nine and seemed to make himself quite at home at once. In no time he and Mrs. Carrell were deep in talk about music, art and the theatre with Linda listening interestedly and putting in a word now and again. It was after ten when their visitor rose to go.

"I hope I haven't overstayed my welcome," he apologized. He hesitated, then walked over to the mantelpiece where a coloured photograph of Mandy held the place of honour. Linda remembered now that she had seen his eyes stray that way more than once that evening. "What a very beautiful girl!" he said softly.

"My eldest daughter," Mrs. Carrell told him proudly,

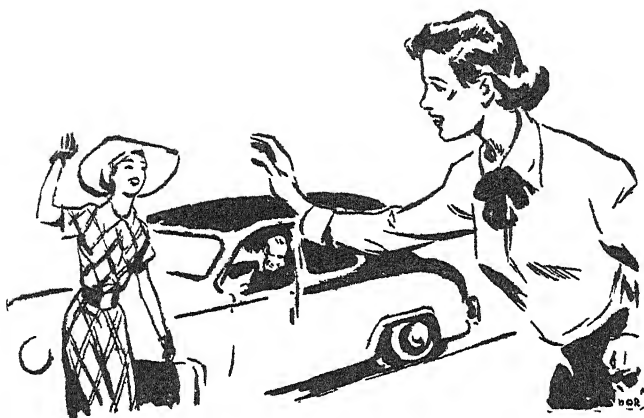
"Mandy . . ." supplied Linda, and then the corners of her mouth lifted mischievously as a thought occurred to her. Yet another beau for her sister? But how absurd! Mandy was only eighteen. And besides . . . there was Clare Truett. . . .

And then Martin was moving towards the door.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Carrell. Good-bye, Linda. I'll pick you up at nine o'clock here then."

When the front door had closed Linda yawned.

"Let's go to bed. You go up and I'll come and undress in your room, Mummy." She gave her mother's arm a little squeeze. "Just for a change. It's rather nice having you all to myself. . . ."



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### BACK AGAIN

"WHAT a lovely day it's been. My brain feels just like an octopus!" Linda laughed, and leaned back against the cushions of the car seat with a sigh of mock exhaustion.

"An octopus?" Martin Grant turned his head with a questioning smile.

"Yes. . . . You know, tentacles waving in every direction with all sorts of thoughts, impressions and ambitions. . . ." Linda waved her hand vaguely and sighed again. "But it was a simply wonderful experience."

"I know just what Linda means," Clare Truett agreed smilingly. "I felt a little like that myself at my first Summer School. So much to see and hear all at once."

The four of them were on their way back from the Summer School, Martin in the driving-seat of the car with Clare beside him, Linda with Johnny Vernon in the back. She had liked him better again today. After his remark on the previous afternoon she had been half afraid that he would be arrogantly bored with everything. But if he had been bored he had not let them know. In fact, now he seemed rather subdued. She was thankful for his silence as she went over in her mind all the exciting events of the day.

It had been a lovely drive down to Dryslake where the Summer School was held in an old mansion with spacious grounds. For one week every summer it housed a group of young people who were interested in music. Linda had sat through Martin Grant's lecture, admiring his grip of the subject and his masterly playing of the violin. But besides this there was another session with the young people's orchestra led by a well-known conductor. And for added measure there was the babel of talk between lectures and during the meals; talk such as only occurs when many people with the same interests are brought together from all over the country.

"It isn't quite the same with anyone else," mused Linda through a hazy dream of *crescendos*, *fortissimos* and the like. Ordinary people talked about music, but unless it was practically their life, as it was to most of these young students at the school, one didn't get that excited feeling which comes on the tide of enthusiasm.

"I simply must go there next year," she said aloud now, and added softly: "And I shall try to persuade Tony to come too."

She wished he could have been there today. It

was the sort of thing he needed to revive his enthusiasm for a musical career, and make him take a bolder stand against his mother's opposition. But even as she thought it, her heart sank. What could combat Tony's own attitude? His conviction that because his father had died it was up to him to fill the gap in his mother's life; to do as she wished and go into a bank?

Linda sighed and turned her head to find Johnny looking at her curiously.

"You think a lot of that chap Ryan, don't you?"

His tone made Linda blush.

"Oh well," she explained carelessly, "he's lived next door to us for ages. He's just like a brother. . . ."

And it was surprising how much she had missed him while he was away. Just as if he were really one of the family. Never mind. Only another three days and he would be home. Mandy too and Sally. Even Jill was coming out of the hospital next week, after having made marvellous progress from all accounts. And the following week-end they were expecting Daddy. He would spend a brief spell with his family and also report personally in London regarding the progress of his work.

It was getting dark as the car slowed down and drew up outside the house in Moreton Avenue. Linda gave a quick glance at the lighted windows of the lounge and said shyly:

"Won't you come in? Do, please. Mother loves company and she's been on her own all day."

Already the front door was open and there was Mrs. Carrell smiling a welcome and adding her pressure to Linda's invitation.

"Yes, do come in. There's coffee all ready. It won't take a moment to heat."

It was almost like their usual evenings, Linda thought, exchanging a look of satisfaction with her mother as they bustled about looking after their guests. Clare Truett was curled up on the window-seat, her dark eyes alight with enthusiasm as she described the scenes at Dryslake and waved a hand to demonstrate the curious antics of the well-known conductor. Martin Grant, his long legs twined round the piano stool, put in a word here and there to lend colour to the vivid picture of their day.

At last Martin rose and put his hand on Clare's shoulder.

"We ought to be going, Clare, don't you think?"

Clare's small dark head only reached Martin's shoulder. Just as high as his heart, Linda found herself thinking, with dreams of romance between these two so obviously suited to each other in interest.

"Yes, we really should. I do hope we haven't stayed too long, Mrs. Carrell. I'm afraid you made us too comfortable."

As they moved across the room Linda saw Clare pause by the mantelpiece, her eyes on the photograph of Mandy. She turned to look at Martin with a curious little lift of her eyebrows, but when she spoke her words were addressed to Mrs. Carrell.

"What a lovely girl! Your eldest daughter, isn't it? I've heard about her."

But Martin's hand was under her elbow and now he gave it a little shake.

"Look, Clare, we really must hurry. Mr. Vernon will think we've had an accident or something."

Mrs. Carrell and Linda went with them to the door, calling good night as the car door slammed for the last time.

"I'll lock up, Mummy," Linda said, giving her mother a gentle push towards the stairs. She went into the lounge and stood for a moment gazing at the photograph of Mandy, feeling a little worried. With beauty like her sister's it would be possible to cause unhappiness, and Mandy would be the first to hate that. All the same, it did seem sometimes as if she had that fatal quality like . . . like Helen of Troy, or someone like that. She hoped Martin hadn't been sitting there gazing at the photograph and hurting poor Clare, who was so awfully nice and suitable for a musical person like Martin. The pictured eyes of her sister seemed to Linda to hold an amused look and suddenly it was as if Mandy was actually there. Almost Linda could hear her saying in that soft husky voice of hers:

"Linda, you little idiot! Why, he's never even met me! For heaven's sake stop being such a romantic and get to bed."

Feeling as young and silly as if Mandy had really spoken, Linda plumped up the cushions of the settee furiously, switched off the light and ran up the stairs.

Taking her pyjamas and dressing-gown into her mother's bedroom as she had done the previous night, Linda talked again about the Summer School, filling in details as she had not had a chance to do before.

"It was all so exciting! Oh, Mummy, I do want to go there for the whole week next year." She took a deep breath. "Perhaps by that time . . . well, I guess I shall *know*. . . ." she finished dramatically.

Mrs. Carrell looked a little startled.

"Know what, dear?"

"I'll know whether I'm really going to the Royal College of Music. It's what I want more than anything,

but I have to get my school exams first, you said. And then it's a question of whether I'll pass the College exam. There are never many places so I've got to be a lot better than I am now." Linda's face looked quite tense.

Mrs. Carrell smiled and put her hands on Linda's shoulders.

"It's a great thing to know what you want to do, dear. And Daddy and I have already promised that if you work hard we'll do our part. And now," she finished pathetically, "if you would *please* get off my bed I'd very much like to get into it."

Linda jumped up, laughing.

"Poor Mummy! There you are. Good night, darling." She raced to the door, stopped and turned. "Tony doesn't like Johnny Vernon, but I don't think he's such a bad chap when you get to know him and when he forgets about his father having money. But he was telling me on the way home today that Mr. Vernon doesn't encourage him to be serious about his music. He wants Johnny to come into the business, and he's afraid of him getting too interested in something that might put him off. So he's as bad as Mrs. Ryan."

"But . . . is he musical?" Mrs. Carrell's voice came rather sleepily from the bed.

"Well . . ." Linda hesitated, then gave a little laugh. "I wouldn't say he was, really. But if he *wants* to be . . . Oh, darling, I'm still keeping you awake. I won't say another word. Good night!"

The next few days seemed to go very quickly, and suddenly it was Saturday again and the holiday-makers were due home. Linda ran about the house cheerfully, cleaning and polishing and putting fresh flowers in

Mandy's room. She felt quite excited, realizing just how much she had missed her sister and how nice it would be to see her again. It was nearly five o'clock that afternoon when a car stopped at the gate. Mrs. Carrell had still not returned from the hospital, but Linda ran to the door and threw it open with a welcoming flourish.

But instead of the Marshalls' car, which she had been expecting to see, it was Mrs. Ryan and Tony in the old blue tourer. But Mandy was there as well; a Mandy who was bronzed, beautiful and very gay as she hugged Linda and waved an explanatory hand.

"Mrs. Ryan and Tony called to see us on Tuesday and stayed on. So I came back in their car as there was more room. We've all had the most heavenly time! Haven't we, Tony?"

"Rather! Hallo, Linda. How's Jill . . .?" Tony's long thin figure was uncurling itself from the car and now he turned to help out Mrs. Ryan. "I'll put the car away, Mum. You must be tired."

"Won't you come in, Mrs. Ryan? Mother isn't back from the hospital, but I'm expecting her almost immediately." Even to her own ears Linda's voice sounded stiff and flat as she fought with a queer sense of depression that was almost frightening. Surely she couldn't be jealous because Mandy had not only enjoyed a wonderful holiday, but Tony's company as well? The feeling was gone in a flash and she was able to repeat more warmly: "Do come in, please. You must be longing for a cup of tea and the kettle's boiling."

"Thank you, Linda, I would like to have just a cup of tea. And then I must go straight to bed. I've one of my heads coming on, I'm afraid." Mrs. Ryan

put a white hand to her forehead and sent a pathetic little smile in Mandy's direction. "I found these children's chatter a little exhausting. No, dear, don't apologize. I didn't really *mind*. It's just that with such a very delicate constitution I feel any extra strain."

Looking rather conscience-stricken, Mandy and Tony followed Mrs. Ryan into the house. Tony fussed over his mother, establishing her in the most comfortable chair and putting cushions behind her head while Linda hurried into the kitchen to make the tea. When she came back Mrs. Ryan was saying to Tony:

"No, of course I didn't *mind* you insisting on staying for the rest of the time at Seaton, dear. I was only too glad for you to be enjoying yourself. It's just that when one has lost so much, as I have, one gets perhaps too dependent on the only person left. And when that person is just a little thoughtless..."

She closed her eyes and Linda exchanged a look with Mandy, completely won over now. Poor, poor Tony! No wonder he snatched at the chance of companionship. It must be awful to have to put up with that sort of thing. Linda could see it all now; Tony's boredom and his delight at the meeting with the others. And possibly Mrs. Ryan had made no objection to their joining forces then; had even perhaps enjoyed it. It was only afterwards that she would complain, making Tony feel guilty and thereby getting more of his attention.

And now here was her own mother, warm and kind and welcoming. Linda watched her as she hugged Mandy, soothed Mrs. Ryan, and somehow established a sympathetic and undemanding contact with Tony. Perhaps she, too, sometimes felt tired and headachy, yet she was always bright with a ready sympathy for

others. "It's because she's so interested in everything and always thinking about other people instead of herself. That's the secret," thought Linda with a warm rush of affection. "Oh, I hope I can be like that . . .!"

When Mrs. Ryan and Tony had gone the three of them sat on in the lounge talking. Or rather, Mandy talked and the other two listened to her animated tales of bathing parties, picnics and pier concerts.

"It must have been fun," Linda said at last a trifle wistfully.

She had not meant to sound envious, but Mandy's arms went round her warmly in a quick hug.

"Poor old Lin! And *you* haven't had a proper holiday at all," she said contritely.

"I didn't mean——" began Linda earnestly, but Mandy interrupted.

"Of course I know you didn't. All the same, it must have been a dull fortnight for you and you jolly well deserve something nice to make up." She put her head on one side and regarded Linda thoughtfully. "I'll think of something, never fear. And that reminds me . . . I've brought you some presents."

She jumped up and ran out into the hall, returning with her case which she threw on the ground and opened. Kneeling beside it she rummaged among her clothes, carelessly packed and looking much less immaculate than when they had started out. "Look, Mummy, I got this for you. And this is yours, Linda. Catch!"

While Mrs. Carrell was exclaiming with pleasure at the blue vase in Devon pottery, Linda was searching for a tiny object wrapped in a large twist of tissue paper. It lay in her hand at last—a small brass charm made to hang round her neck on a chain. Linda gazed

with delight at the pixie balanced on what looked like a horseshoe.

"Turn it over," directed Mandy. "It's a donkey's shoe."

There was something printed on the other side of the charm. Linda read aloud:

"*'A pixie and a donkey's shoe will always bring good luck to you. . . .'* Oh, Mandy, I like it awfully! 'Thanks ever so much.'"

Even as she slipped it back into the tissue paper the thought came into her mind: "It's lucky. . . . I'll always wear it when I specially want something . . . like passing the entrance exam to the College. . . ."

And though she laughed a little inside herself at the childish superstition, somehow the idea took root.

In the middle of the next week Jill came home, sunny-tempered and as bonny-looking as though there had been nothing the matter with her. For a few days Mandy and Linda treated her as though made of fragile glass, petting her and waiting on her. Jill, however, was so matter-of-fact and unconcerned about their attentions that they soon began to forget that she had been ill.

Mr. Carrell was expected on Saturday and the excitement mounted as the moment of his arrival drew nearer. When the taxi stopped at the gate the three girls rushed to the door, hugging and kissing him as though he had been away for years instead of weeks.

"Here, hold on!" he begged in laughing protest. "Mother, they're tearing me limb from limb!"

But he was obviously their willing prisoner and allowed himself to be dragged into the dining-room and put in the place of honour at the tea-table in front of

a magnificent cake, made by Linda and decorated by Mandy, with some help from Jill.

"I put the cherries on," the latter told him earnestly. "I'm sorry that one just slipped a bit."

It was not until the gay meal was almost over and the talk and questioning had died down a little that Jill voiced the question that had been in the back of everyone's mind.

"Will you have to go back to that horrid place, Daddy? Will you have to go away again?"

Mr. Carrell crumbled a piece of cake thoughtfully, then he glanced round the table at the anxious faces and decided to take the family into his confidence.

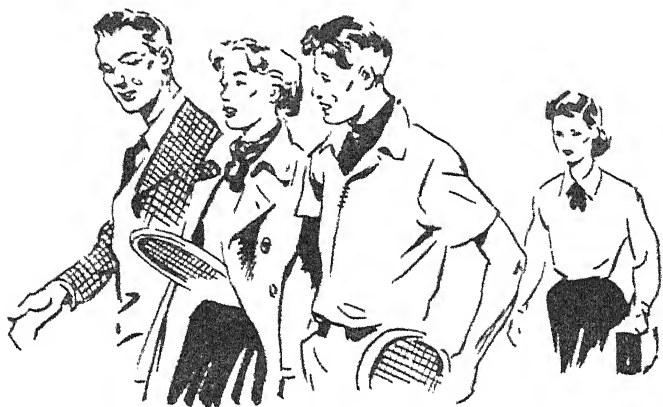
"Yes, dear," he said quietly, "I'm afraid I shall. And at the moment it seems very likely that I shall have to be there for good."

Three pairs of horrified eyes stared at him aghast. From the other end of the table Mrs. Carrell's steady glance and determined smile showed that already, by letter, this possibility had been thrashed out between she and her husband. It was Jill again who put into words the fears of the other two.

"But, Daddy . . . you can't stay there all alone for always . . .?"

Mr. Carrell sighed and glanced at his two elder daughters, knowing that what he was going to say would deal them a bitter blow.

"No, darling. . . . It will not be just yet, and it's still possible that it may not be at all, but if and when the decision is final we shall have to sell this house and find another up there."



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### MARTIN TAKES A HAND

"THANK you. Now, shall we take the Minuet through once more? And with a little more emphasis on the strings this time, please."

Smiling pleasantly, Martin Grant tapped the music stand in front of him and the Harbridge Youth Orchestra followed the lead of his baton with a little more confidence than they had done previously. But as the strings took up the melody, Linda lowered her clarinet from her lips and listened to the result with some disapproval.

They were never as good when Josephine took the lead, capable player though she was. It was horrid of Tony to have let them down this evening again. Especially as there was now only one more practice before the concert; this very first concert on which

the whole future of the new orchestra might rest. And it was all Mandy's fault. Ever since the holiday she had treated Tony as though he were her property. No, perhaps that wasn't quite fair. Tony had asked for it by being so slavishly devoted that Mandy was never given a chance to realize that there were other things he should be doing besides dancing attendance on her.

Linda sighed and tried to fight back her growing sense of depression. Everything seemed to have become so difficult and horrid lately. And overshadowing everything else was the nagging possibility of the family leaving Harbridge. Well, if that happened it would certainly resolve part of her worry about Tony, because with Mandy so far away Tony couldn't be distracted by her and would work harder at his music. Linda sighed again. Perhaps she should want that to happen. But she didn't; quite desperately she didn't. It would be perfectly awful if they had to go. She would have to leave the orchestra and all her friends.

Besides, regarding Tony's music, there was always Mrs. Ryan. . . .

With a guilty start Linda discovered that the other clarinets had taken up their part again. Putting her instrument to her lips she hastily gave her attention once more to the music before her on the stand.

There was no chance to think of Tony again. One of the items chosen for the concert was the English Folk Dance Suite by Dr. Vaughan Williams, and during the larger part of this the part for the woodwinds needed all Linda's concentration.

When the practice was over, Linda lined up with the others to get her share of the programmes which would admit members of the public to the concert.

"I'll take fifty," she told Clare Gruett when she reached the table.

Clare raised her eyebrows and smiled.

"Goodness! You must have a lot of friends, Linda."

"Some of them are for Tony to sell," Linda admitted, "but I mean to get rid of all of them, even if it means canvassing from door to door."

"That's the spirit," Martin Grant put in quietly from just behind her. "We must show Mr. Vernon that we mean business. He's not charging us for the use of the hall for this first concert, but after that we shall have to pay our way."

"Oh, I do hope we can!" Linda said earnestly, gathering up her pile of programmes and moving aside for the next person.

As she turned away she saw Martin lean over Clare's shoulder and murmur something. Beyond the fact that it reminded her briefly of her romantic plans for these two people she liked so much, she gave it little thought. But leaving the building a few minutes later, she heard footsteps hurrying after her and turned in surprise to see Martin Grant. Even then she did not realize that he wished to speak to her and walked along at a quicker pace with slightly heightened colour, in case he should think that he had to.

But now he was alongside, saying a little breathlessly:

"Hi there, Linda. I was trying to catch you up. Mind if I walk along with you a little way?"

She nodded, speechlessly, knowing all at once why he wanted to. He was going to ask her about Tony. The question came, as she had known it would.

"What's the matter with young Tony Ryan, Linda?"

"The . . . the matter?" she repeated, trying to put off her answer until she knew just what he meant.

"Yes. He's quite a brilliant musician, yet sometimes he doesn't seem to care at all. . . . And lately," he shrugged, "well, it's obvious he cares nothing for the orchestra. Yet he seemed so keen at first."

"Well, it's partly because of——" Linda stopped, knowing suddenly that Tony wouldn't like to have his mother talked about. She subsided into miserable silence, because after all, what was there she could say? If she said, too, that Mandy was partly to blame, it would sound silly. She remembered what Mandy, herself, had said only the other evening when Linda had tackled her about it.

"Don't be so stupid, Linda! How can I help it if Tony likes doing other things better than scraping away eternally on his violin? I suppose he can please himself? Why, Mrs. Ryan was saying only yesterday that Tony doesn't have to bother, in any case. Music just comes naturally to him."

"Even people with genius have to practise," Linda had said heatedly, and Mandy had looked at her with that amused expression which always made her feel so childish.

"Never mind, Linda. When we've finished the tennis tournament it will be better and the little genius will have more time. If everyone had been sensible and played their matches off when they were supposed to it would be finished by now. As it is, it gets dark earlier every evening and we've still two more rounds to go."

But Martin Grant was still silent as if waiting for her to finish her answer. Linda said desperately:

"Tony's always been like that. Sort of . . . erratic. I know it's silly, but——"

She broke off with a start. For there were Tony and Mandy now walking along the High Street towards them from the other direction. In a few minutes they would all meet. Hoping Martin would leave her, Linda stood still and said earnestly:

"I'll tell Tony what you said. I'll tell him you were asking for him. I'm sure he'll come to our next practice."

But now Martin's hand was under Linda's elbow and he was propelling her forward.

"There's Tony now. I'd like a word with him myself, I think. And . . . isn't that your sister with him?"

"Yes. It's Mandy. . . ." Linda said, disguising her surprise that Martin should have recognized her from a mere photograph.

Tony, impenitent and gay, waved a hand and crossed the road towards them.

"Hallo, Lin! Hallo, sir! I'm awfully sorry I couldn't make it this evening but Mandy and I were down to play off a tennis tournament round. Oh, Mandy, I don't think you know Martin Grant, our orchestra leader and my music master."

Mandy put out her hand. She was looking particularly lovely, Linda thought, with a loose blue coat over her white tennis dress. The blue exactly matched her dancing eyes as she smiled up at Martin.

"I've heard a lot about you," she said earnestly.

"All good things, I hope?" Martin was smiling, too. Linda cut across these inanities accusingly.

"You can't have been playing tennis all this time, Mandy. It's been too dark for ages now."

It was Tony who answered.

"Of course we haven't. We stayed to console our opponents who lost heavily, fortunately for us," he

said gaily. "The poor things were feeling so suicidal that they had to be cheered with bright quips and cracks and many, many glasses of lemonade."

Mandy groaned.

"Yes. My poor inside feels like a pond."

The path wasn't wide enough for the four of them. In vain Linda tried to get Mandy to fall behind with her so that Martin could have the promised word with Tony. But Mandy either couldn't or wouldn't see what she was getting at and skipped gaily along between the two males, leaving Linda to fall behind alone as an alternative to the gutter.

It would be all right when they got to their gate she told herself, watching Mandy's bright golden head tilt first to one side and then to the other. When she and Mandy had gone in, Martin could have his talk. And she hoped that he would put the matter to Tony pretty strongly.

But when they did reach the gate Mandy said persuasively:

"You'll come in, won't you? Mother would like to see you again, I know."

And, instead of making some quick excuse as he could easily have done, Martin actually accepted with alacrity. Perhaps he thought that would be the best way of getting a moment with Tony, Linda thought worriedly. But if so, he was doomed to disappointment. For at that moment the window of the front room next door was thrown open and Mrs. Ryan's soft complaining voice came through the dusk.

"Is that you, Tony? Come straight in, won't you? I'll have to get you to make me a hot drink and a bottle. I'm afraid I've taken a chill. . . ."

Tony threw back the front lock of his hair with his impatient gesture and bit his lip.

"All right, Mum. I'm just coming," he called.

He hesitated for a moment, then said good-bye rather curtly to the other three and went in to his own house. Linda felt horribly sorry for him. She followed Martin and Mandy indoors rather slowly, wishing she could have taken his place. But she knew Mrs. Ryan well enough to realize that her own ministrations would not be a welcome alternative to Tony's. Always it seemed she must keep him by her side with her imaginary ailments, her clinging helplessness and her emphasis on the fact that but for her son she would be "all alone". It was a wonder to Linda sometimes that Tony was so nice about it. One rarely heard him protest or lose any of his high spirits.

Remembering the phrase Sally had used laughingly some weeks ago, Linda smiled wryly. She was no nearer to fulfilling what Sally had termed her "mission in life". For where was she to find a husband for Mrs. Ryan?

In the lounge her mother was greeting Martin.

"It's nice to see you again, Mr. Grant. How is the orchestra coming along?"

"Fine. They're a good bunch of kids and work like beavers." Martin glanced at Mandy, his lips twitching upwards into a teasing smile. "At least, most of them do. I don't know that I can say as much for young Tony Ryan, who should be one of our pillars, so to speak."

Mandy pouted prettily.

"I suppose you're blaming me because Tony didn't turn up tonight, but honestly, it wasn't exactly my fault, or his. I did persuade him to enter for the tennis

tournament, but I didn't know that I was going to draw him as my partner, or that we were going to get through to the semi-finals."

"I'll try to forgive you," Martin assured her with mock solemnity, "on one condition. . . ."

"And that is . . .?" Mandy tilted her face up to him provocatively.

"That you don't manage to make the semi-finals coincide with my last rehearsal, or the concert."

"That's a bargain. Really," said Mandy. "And if you like, I'll tell him he ought to practice."

Linda beamed at her sister approvingly. This was more like it. Perhaps Tony could be got at through Mandy better than in any other way. Reassured, she dashed into the kitchen to help her mother, accepting, as usual, that she did the work while Mandy did the entertaining.

Martin did not stay long. When he had gone, the two girls and their mother sat on talking; about Jill and how well she seemed now, and about their father and the possible move.

"Oh, Mummy, do you really think it will come?" asked Linda anxiously.

Mrs. Carrell shook her head.

"I can't say, darling. Sometimes I feel we'd have been better to wait a bit before telling you, but I know Daddy felt that if we had to go quickly, it would be nicer if you had some preparation. . . . If it's any consolation, I do know that the firm are anxious to have your father back at this end, so if they *can* get anyone who is able to carry on up there, they will." She sighed. "I know *I'd* like him to be back."

"Poor Mummy!" Linda jumped up and hugged her. "It is worse for you, though we all miss him frightfully."

When they went upstairs Mandy called Linda into her room. Her face was wearing a mysterious expression that roused her younger sister's curiosity.

"Catch!" she said, taking an envelope out of a drawer and tossing it across to Linda.

"What is it?" Linda turned the sealed envelope over in her hands almost fearfully.

"Open it, you silly little date. It won't bite!" Mandy told her, laughing.

Tearing it open Linda took out the two thin slips of paper and stared at them wide-eyed.

"I said you should have something to make up for not having a holiday," Mandy said. "It isn't much, but it's the best I could do."

"Tickets for the Prom! And a Beethoven night, too! Oh, Mandy, you peach!" Linda threw her arms round Mandy and hugged her until she begged for mercy. "What a simply lovely surprise."

"I got two because I thought it would be more fun to have someone with you. And they ought to be good seats. The man told me they were, though I don't really know much about the Albert Hall."

"Mandy . . . you wouldn't like to come, I suppose?"

"Use one of my presents on myself? Not likely!" Mandy laughed. "No, you'd better take someone who really appreciates music."

"Tony . . . ?" Somehow it was important to know whether Mandy thought that a good idea.

"Why not? Yes, Tony would enjoy it."

There was no hesitation in Mandy's voice and Linda hugged her again.

"Thanks most awfully. It was sweet of you to think of it. And now I suppose I'd better get to bed."

Linda moved towards the door, then turned. "I *do* like Martin Grant, don't you?"

Mandy's reply was muffled as it came through the folds of the frock she was pulling over her head, but Linda took it to be in the affirmative. She went on dreamily:

"I think he and Clare Truett will make a lovely couple. You haven't met her yet, have you. She came after that day at the Summer School when you were away, and Mummy liked her awfully. Of course, I've always liked her at school, but somehow it's quite different now I've met her outside. I hardly think of her as one of our mistresses."

Mandy's face appeared at last, rather flushed and reproachful.

"You might have given me a hand. Couldn't you see I was caught up?"

"No, sorry, I didn't." Linda apologized carelessly, her thoughts still pursuing her romantic dream. "And of course they're both so musical, although she isn't as well known as Martin is. I heard him playing the violin on the wireless the other evening when I was round at Sally's. I guess he's almost as good as . . . as Menuhin."

"Who's he when he's at home?" asked Mandy flippantly.

"Oh, Mandy, you must have heard of him! You're just pretending."

"No, I'm not. But then *I'm* not musical. . . ."

Mandy said almost sulkily and tied a silk wrapper round her slim waist with an emphatic tug as if to end the discussion. She picked up her sponge-bag and made for the bathroom. "Anyway, we've talked long enough and I'm tired."



## CHAPTER NINE

# DEADLOCK

WHEN Mandy came in to tea on the first day of the autumn term at the Art School, Mrs. Carrell remarked:

"How's Jacqueline? We haven't seen much of her lately."

Mandy looked up with a rather guilty expression.

"She wasn't there today. And I've been thinking . . . I really should have gone round before this. I've scarcely seen anything of her since we came back from the holiday."

"You've seen Joe," Linda pointed out slyly.

"Yes, but somehow we didn't get round to Jacqueline. At least," Mandy admitted reluctantly, "he did say once that she didn't seem very happy these days, but afterwards I forgot about it. I'll go round this evening. Perhaps she's got a cold or something."

"Yes, I should, dear. I do hope she's all right. She seemed to be getting over things a bit . . . well, anyway, go round and bring her back here with any paintings she has to show me. I do love seeing her things."

When Mandy had gone Linda helped her mother and Jill to clear away, then went in to the lounge to practise. Sitting down on the music stool she stared at the piano keys and reflected rather miserably that there was someone else who hadn't been round so much just lately. Was it because Mrs. Ryan had been on again about the Bank that Tony seemed to have lost interest in the orchestra and indeed in everything but running around with Mandy and the other boys?

Linda sighed softly and lifted her hands to the keys. She would do her own music no good by glooming over Tony's slackness.

After running up and down some scales on the piano she picked up her clarinet and was soon immersed in the intricacies of a new study. It was strange the way this black pipe with its silver keys and fittings had gripped her imagination and forced her to try harder and harder to master its difficulties; to persuade from it the purest sounds it could render. After the study and some *arpeggios*, Linda worked at the *staccato* passages and then allowed herself the relaxation of playing through the clarinet part of the Folk Dance Suite. That brought Jill into the room and the little girl danced around singing ". . . *seventeen come Sunday*" in a gay piping treble. Suddenly she broke off and cried: "Someone at the door!"

It was Mandy again, followed by Jacqueline; a Jacqueline from whose slightly reddened eyelids Linda hastily averted her glance and said warmly:

"How nice to see you!"

Behind Jacqueline's back Mandy was making pantomime signs designed to warn Linda to make no comments, and as soon as possible she left the other two together and slipped out into the kitchen.

"Jacqueline's here, Mummy. And isn't it beastly! She isn't coming to the Art School any more."

"Why not?" Mrs. Carrell's voice was quietly interested.

"Oh, something stupid about her not wanting to. But I'm almost sure her aunt is at the back of it because when I asked if Mrs. Marshall had said she couldn't, Jacqueline got all agitated and said no, and that I wasn't to let her aunt think I believed that. Mummy, it's so absurd. Can't you do something? You know how good she is. Far, far better than I am."

Mrs. Carrell smiled faintly. She knew well enough that what Mandy said was true. She had been convinced all along that her eldest daughter was no artistic genius. She had only what one might call a pretty talent. But Jacqueline was different. There was a fire and inspiration in her roughest drawings that stirred Mrs. Carrell to regrets and longings that were deemed forgotten. Now she said thoughtfully:

"Did Jacqueline bring any drawings to show me?"

"Yes, I made her. There were some lovely little sketches she did while we were on holiday. I told her I thought it would be mean of her not to let you see them because they would give a far better idea of the place than my postcards and snaps would ever do."

"Well, while she's showing them to me you had better make some excuse to get yourself and Linda out of the room. I'll have a chat with her."

"All right." Mandy nodded her head conspiratorially.

"I'd better go in now or she'll suspect I've been talking about her. . . ."

When Jill had gone off to bed Mrs. Carrell brought her darning basket into the lounge and established herself on the settee next to Jacqueline. Threading a needle with white wool, she took up a sock of Jill's and regarded it thoughtfully.

"To darn or not to darn? That is the question."

Jacqueline's rather set expression broke into a smile.

"Is there an alternative?"

Mrs. Carrell sighed, then smiled.

"Well, I could throw this pair away as I feel half inclined to. And then I remember what they cost. . . . Really, for a small girl Jill makes bigger holes than you would think possible."

"Couldn't I help?" offered Jacqueline.

"I believe Mandy said you had some sketches to show me. Let's look at those first."

Mandy stood up.

"If you two wouldn't mind me leaving you for a little while, I'm going to wash my hair. I really should do it this evening and it won't take long. Lin, you promised to rinse it for me this time. I always manage to pour the water down my neck."

Over Jacqueline's head she signalled to her sister that her absence also was to be desired, and as they went out of the room Jacqueline moved almost reluctantly towards the piano on which her portfolio was lying.

"I don't suppose they're much good. But there were some interesting little bits I felt I wanted to paint. Mandy said you'd like to see them. . . ."

She proffered the folder with an embarrassed air

and Mrs. Carrell put it on her lap, turning the sheets of paper slowly.

"Oh, I love this one . . . and this. You've really captured the feeling, Jacqueline; the wind on the cliffs, the smell of the sea and the cry of the seagulls. One might almost be there!"

Under the influence of Mrs. Carrell's obviously genuine praise, Jacqueline's tense expression relaxed and she looked eager. Then suddenly the smiles left her face and she gathered the paintings together, sweeping them back into the folder with an abrupt movement.

"Well, that's that!" she said in a harsh voice. "Just a pleasant little hobby. You know I'm not going back to the Art School?"

Mrs. Carrell's needle was now flashing in and out of the white sock once more.

"Mandy said something about it," she said quietly. "And what are you going to do instead?"

Jacqueline's jaw set obstinately.

"I'm going to take a secretarial course in shorthand and typing. I've already enrolled and I start next Monday."

There was a long silence, then Mrs. Carrell said gently:

"You must have a good reason for doing that. Could you tell me about it?"

Jacqueline twisted her hands.

"It's really . . . money," she said in a strangled voice. "I knew that Aunt Margaret let me go to the Art School last term because she didn't want to upset me just then and that she really thought Art a waste of time. But I didn't realize that I ought to be earning my living . . . now. You see, Mummy wasn't able

to leave anything and my aunt and uncle aren't well off. Aunt Margaret is rather a dear, really, and she does her best not to make me feel a burden, but . . . I can't help knowing. . . ."

"And have you talked it over with your aunt?"

Jacqueline smiled wryly.

"Not exactly. I'm *trying* to make her believe that the secretarial course is what I want. The halo slips a bit sometimes. Oh, you do think I'm right?" she finished, gazing at Mrs. Carrell earnestly.

Mrs. Carrell carefully cut a white thread.

"Yes, dear, I do." She put her hand over Jacqueline's in a soft, understanding pressure. "It's tough, I admit, but you have great gifts and I'm convinced that someday you'll be able to use them to the full. You're young and there's plenty of time, though I know you must feel impatient. It's an uphill climb for an artist to win recognition and it won't do any harm to have an alternative to fall back on when times are hard. Besides, the more you see of the world, the better artist you will be. Meanwhile, there are evening classes and some spare time. You'll get there, Jacqueline, if you don't give up."

Jacqueline's eyes were misty but her mouth had lost its droop. She said shakily with a wan little smile:

"I shan't give up. I don't think I could. Oh, Mrs. Carrell, you have made me feel much better, though I don't know quite how you've done it for you haven't said a bit what I thought you'd say."

"Which was . . .?"

"Well, I thought you'd be indignant . . . for me, I mean. And I thought you'd tell me I must fight to stay on at the Art School, whatever happened; that I mustn't waste my talents on such ordinary things as

shorthand and typing. Then I should have felt all sacrificial and . . . and pathetic." The smile was a real one now. "You've taken the wind out of my sails."

Mrs. Carrell leaned over and patted her hand again.

"You're a dear, Jacqueline. But hush now . . . here come the other two——" She broke off and made a mock obeisance as Mandy came into the room, her head swathed in a towel, turban fashion. "Enter—the Rajah of Bong! Turn on the electric fire, Mandy. It's quite chilly in here tonight."

Mandy sank to her knees in front of the electric fire and unwinding the towel shook her hair free. As she pushed it about with her fingers it fell into soft curls, shining and golden.

"You have such pretty hair, Mandy," remarked Jacqueline softly, and Linda, coming into the room to settle herself on a pouffe beside her sister, gave a sigh.

"No credit to her. It's like a baby's hair and she doesn't have to do a thing about it. I wish I'd been dished out with some just like it."

"Oh, I don't know. . . ." Mandy put her head on one side and regarded her sister thoughtfully, her composure not in the least disturbed by the compliments. "Your hair sort of suits you, Lin. I just can't imagine you with any other kind."

"Thanks awfully, darling, for those few kind words." Linda made an impish face at her. "I'm sure they're meant to be consoling. Well, as I'm not likely to *have* any other kind, I shall have to put up with this, anyway."

Jacqueline sighed.

"I ought to go. I told Aunt Margaret I wouldn't be late——" She broke off and smiled across at Mandy

as Linda slipped away to answer a knock at the door. "I bet that's Joe. Anything for an excuse, eh? No, it's all right. You look just as nice as ever like that. . . ." She stood up and added hastily, "I don't want him to think I'm stopping. . . ."

A moment later Joe Carter breezed into the room, his face falling as he saw his sister preparing for departure.

"Aunt Margaret said you were here, Sis, and I happened to be passing. Good evening, Mrs. Carrell. Hallo, Mandy!"

Jacqueline allowed him to pay his respects then elbowed him firmly to the door.

"I promised Aunt Margaret I wouldn't be late," she repeated, pushing her arms into the sleeves of her coat which she took from the stand in the hall.

Defeated, Joe made the most of his few minutes with Mandy, booking her as his partner at a dance which was to be held the next evening. As they all stood at the open door, talking, a tall figure vaulted the low wall between the two houses and landed beside them. Jacqueline gave a startled exclamation and Mandy put her hand to her heart in an exaggerated gesture of alarm.

"Why, Tony, you wretch, how you startled me!"

"Sorry, ma'am," Tony retorted with cheerful impenitence. He shot a somewhat baleful look in Joe's direction and went on. "I just came to ask you something, Mandy, but I'll wait until the mob breaks up."

"We can take a hint!" Jacqueline said, laughing. "Come along, Joe."

As the brother and sister went off together, Linda hesitated a moment, then went slowly back into the lounge. But she heard Tony behind her say eagerly:

"I came to see you about tomorrow, Mandy. The dance in aid of the Hospital. Will you come with me?"

"I'm sorry, Tony, but I've just told Joe——"

Linda shut the door firmly and heard no more. Her mother had gone upstairs and she was alone in the room. There was no one to see the tears that came suddenly to her eyes, though she clenched her hands to keep them from falling, just in case the others came in. Tony didn't seem to be *her* friend any more, though when they had gone to the Prom concert together the other evening she could have sworn they were back to the old footing.

Behind her the door opened suddenly. Turning her back, Linda began to tidy the cushions to give herself a little more time. Turning cautiously she saw Tony watching her with an amused smile, hands in his pockets as he leaned carelessly against the door. Somehow the sight infuriated her.

"I heard what you asked Mandy," she burst out, "and I just don't know how you *can*!"

"Ask Mandy to come to a dance? Well, it's quite easy really."

Linda disregarded the flippancy and went on angrily:

"You know very well it's the last practice before the concert and Martin Grant is depending on you to come. I don't know what you wanted to join the orchestra for if you weren't keen."

Tony slashed at a passing fly vindictively.

"Keep your wool on. Mandy's going to the dance with Joe, and as I don't fancy playing gooseberry I shall probably go to the practice anyway."

"Good of you, I'm sure, to honour us with your company when nothing better offers."

Linda was trembling now with suppressed rage, yet hating at the same time the fact that she was quarrelling with Tony. They had never really quarrelled before. It was always Mandy and Tony who had the rows when they were younger and Linda on whom Tony had depended to back up his point of view. Remembering this now, Linda could not trust herself to say any more. Turning on her heel she ran out of the room and upstairs, washing and undressing with feverish haste and then flinging herself into bed.

Downstairs she heard the front door shut and the voices of her mother and Mandy as they talked quietly together. A little later on Mandy pushed open the bedroom door and said softly:

"You asleep, Linda?"

But Linda kept her eyes tightly closed and her breathing quiet and even. Mandy stood there uncertainly for a few minutes, then she closed the door again quietly.

Linda heard her footsteps going along to her own room and, turning her head into the pillow, wept the tears she had kept back so long.



## CHAPTER TEN

# THE CONCERT

LINDA took her place among the members of the orchestra on the platform and looked down into the body of the hall with satisfaction. Most of the seats were already filled and even now late-comers were straggling in to occupy some of the empty ones. She had been able to tell Clare Truett at the rehearsal that she had no programmes to return and it looked as though other people's efforts had also been successful.

Down in the second row she could see her mother and Mandy with old Miss Hallam and Mrs. Ryan next to them. Mr. Vernon, the owner of the hall, was there, too, sitting next to Mrs. Ryan and looking enormous beside her. Linda glanced at Johnny and smiled to herself. She hoped Mr. Vernon would not notice if Johnny left off playing because he had lost

the place again. And then she remembered what Johnny had said about his father and realized that it would not worry him.

Now the orchestra was tuning up softly. Linda warmed the mouthpiece of her clarinet between her hands and glanced again at the violin section. She caught Tony's eye and he winked at her and ran up a scale with a casual flourish. For some days after their quarrel she had been cool with him but by being specially nice to her and working harder than usual at his music he had won her round.

Now Martin Grant, distinguished-looking in immaculate evening dress, strode on to the platform to a spattering of applause. He bowed and took his place at the rostrum. The smile he gave his little company of players was confident and Linda, who had been remembering their last rather ragged rehearsal, suddenly forgot it and believed instead in Martin's assurance that it would be "all right on the night". She saw him glance enquiringly at Tony with his baton lifted, and the concert began.

There was perhaps still a little uncertainty on the part of some of the young instrumentalists, but gradually confidence increased and the ragged threads pulled together to make one harmonious whole. Linda, herself, forgot that out there in the body of the hall were all their friends and relations and felt again the thrill of being a part of the pattern of music woven for their benefit. The Haydn Symphony proceeded smoothly through its four movements, rendered with a musical feeling that made up for any small deficiencies in execution. At the end of the final *Presto* the audience clapped with enthusiasm and settled in to listen to the Beethoven with an added respect. The evening

which they had been prepared to find an endurance test was turning out to be a real pleasure.

During the interval which came after a group of madrigals sung by a London male quartet, there was a buzz of conversation. People stretched their legs and smoked, or drank glasses of lemonade brought round on trays by friends of the players, who had been pressed into service.

Sally Mortimer, her face flushed with importance, had been delighted to be asked. She paused now at the end of the second row and smiled along it enquiringly in Mrs. Carrell's direction.

"Yes, please, Sally. How are you, dear? Three glasses . . . no, four. You'll have one, won't you, Miss Hallam?"

"Lemonade? Dear me, it's a very long time since I indulged. But yes, perhaps it would be nice," the old lady said in a flustered way. It was seldom that she ventured out in the evenings these days, but that dear child Linda had been so persuasive.

Mrs. Ryan held up her white hands in horror as Sally passed a glass to her.

"Oh, no thank you, my dear!" she twittered. "Those long cold drinks don't agree with me at all." She fanned her face with her programme, dropped it, then smiled sweetly at Mr. Vernon next to her as he bent down to pick it up. "Thank you *so* much. I'm so clumsy. Or perhaps it is that I'm a little nervous. It's always an ordeal listening to the performance of someone belonging to one, don't you think?"

"You have someone playing in the orchestra, too?" Mr. Vernon enquired politely, his glance dwelling with some admiration on his dainty neighbour. By jove, she was an attractive little woman to be the

mother of one of these young people on the platform, the youngest of whom must be fifteen at the very least.

"Yes. Tony Ryan, the leader of the violins. That's my boy," Mrs. Ryan said proudly, waving her programme towards the now empty stage. Then she sighed. "Such a dear boy, but a responsibility, of course. And he's all I have left in the world now for my dear husband died five years ago. A woman feels so *lost* without a man, especially when she has to bring up a son."

Mr. Vernon made a sympathetic murmur. He had lost his own wife many years before but she had been the capable, managing sort. If he had been taken instead of Grace she would probably have made a better job of their son than he had done.

"Sons are the dickens of a job to bring up, anyway," he growled. "Do you know my Johnny? Johnny Vernon. . . ."

"Oh, of course, you're Mr. Vernon." Mrs. Ryan looked up at the burly man beside her with an even greater respect. "No, I don't know your son, I think. Tony may . . ." She paused, a memory of some rather harsh words of Tony's coming to her suddenly. Tony had spoken of his dislike for the boy. Some foolish prejudice, no doubt. She must tackle him about it. She said brightly:

"You must point him out to me when they come back. Ah, here they come now. . . ."

"There he is; the tall fair boy with the grin." Mr. Vernon nodded towards the platform. "Plays the violin, but in the back row, and if I'm not mistaken is more of a hindrance than a help. Gets the silliest crazes. A year ago it was skating. Six months ago, acting; now it's music. Always threatens to take them

up professionally and make his living by them," he snorted contemptuously. "Lot of nonsense when there's a perfectly good business for him to step into!"

Mrs. Ryan looked at him admiringly. Here was a man after her own heart; a business man, obviously, and a successful one, she had no doubt. She sighed again.

"That's my trouble with Tony, too. He wants to make music his career, but there's no money in that and I tell him he may have to help support his old mother one day. I've had to be very firm about it."

"Well, the boy is at least talented. He might make a do of it. With young Johnny it's a very different matter——"

He broke off as a woman in the front row turned to frown at him. The orchestra had taken their places again and Martin Grant was lifting his baton. The concert began again with the Folk Dance Suite. Old Miss Hallam nodded her head and with a little smile on her face leaned forward to watch Linda when the clarinets took up the air in the march composed of old Kentish tunes. The dear child was obviously enjoying herself and how well she played! Miss Hallam reminded herself that there was still the little matter of the new clarinet. It was always better to give pleasure during one's lifetime and not wait until one was gone. . . . Perhaps a Christmas present . . . ?

Another group of songs was the next item on the programme, followed by a Miniature Suite by Bach and a Mozart Symphony. As the final note died away, the applause broke out in a positive storm of clapping. Most of the audience knew someone in the orchestra. Those who were musical were almost surprised that

they had enjoyed the performance of these young amateurs so much, the rest were quite overcome by what they considered a miracle of achievement.

Martin Grant smiled and bowed, then turned to the young people behind him, getting them to their feet with a gesture of his hand. They all bowed and to an increased storm of clapping Martin shook hands with Tony, who ran his hand through his hair with the familiar nervous gesture.

It was certainly a triumph. No one had really believed that the young people could accomplish as much in so short a time, or that a big enough audience would be interested. From now on the Harbridge Youth Orchestra would definitely have a place on the map.

Martin made a short speech, paying tribute not only to the players but also to Clare Truett and Mr. Vernon, who had done their share towards making the evening possible.

"Will you say something, Mr. Vernon?" he asked, smiling down at the big man in the second row.

Mark Vernon liked speaking in public and was used to it. He jumped up on to the platform and said in his great booming voice:

"Well, folks, I guess we've all had a surprise tonight. I admit that I have. When Miss Truett first approached me about letting the kids have the hall I was doubtful. And being a business man," he smiled, "I wondered if I wasn't being a bit of a fool to turn down more solid propositions in order to give them one evening a week for rehearsals. But the kids have shown us they deserve our support and in future we'll give it to 'em. Let's have another hand for the young folk, not forgetting their conductor who, I'm sure, deserves more than we know for his patience and courage."

After the applause the orchestra struck up the National Anthem and a few moments later the hall began to empty. Mr. Vernon, back in his seat again, turned to Mrs. Ryan.

"Could I give you a lift anywhere? The car's just outside."

"That's very kind of you. I live in Moreton Avenue and I must say I'd like to take your offer, but . . ." Mrs. Ryan looked up at the big man with a pathetic smile. "I came with my neighbours. . . ." Her glance included Mrs. Carrell and Miss Hallam.

There was an amused twinkle in Mrs. Carrell's eyes as she said quickly:

"Please don't bother about us. We're quite used to Shanks's Pony. . . ."

But Mr. Vernon brushed this aside with hearty contempt.

"Nonsense! How many? Four? Room for you all. Hey, Johnny, I'm running these folks home. You can come along under your own steam," he called as his son jumped down from the platform.

"I'll walk. Please . . . I'd rather," said Mandy. "I'll wait for the others."

Johnny shot her a quick glance and said hastily:

"I'll wait too. See you later, Dad."

As the older folk went off together Johnny followed Mandy down to the door which led to the dressing-rooms.

"You're Linda Carrell's sister, aren't you?"

"That's right. And you're Johnny Vernon," Mandy smiled. "I've heard about you——"

She broke off as Martin Grant came out of a door, pushing his arms into his overcoat. He glanced at them and smiled.

"Good evening, Miss Mandy. You're looking very charming as usual."

Mandy felt her colour rise. To one of the boys she would probably have said something flippant, but now she could not think of anything to say except a murmured "Good evening."

And then Clare Truett joined them, a little scarlet hat perched on her dark curls, her brown eyes bright and eager. She slipped her arm into Martin's with an intimate little gesture.

"Oh, Martin, it *was* successful, wasn't it? I knew it would be. And the kids loved it." She seemed to notice Mandy for the first time and held out her hand. "Now, you're Mandy Carrell, Linda's sister, aren't you? I think I should have known you from Linda's description but I also saw your photograph. . . ."

"How do you do . . .?" Mandy murmured.

She felt very young and gauche beside this dainty little person, who was even more attractive than she had imagined from Linda's description. She was like a small, bright-eyed bird. Mandy was not unduly tall herself, but beside Clare she felt enormous. No wonder tiny women brought out a man's chivalry. . . .

And now Linda and Tony joined them and then Sally. They all left the hall together. Sally's parents were waiting for her outside.

"See you tomorrow, Sal. Thanks awfully for helping," called Linda as she went off with the others.

Martin gave Clare a gentle push to the rear and said:

"We can't all walk abreast or we'll be holding up the traffic. Tony, you and Johnny can look after Clare while I separate the sisters." He led the way with Linda and Mandy one on each side of him, and Tony chanted gaily:

"We all go the same way home. . . ."

"But do we?" objected Linda, turning to their tall escort. "I thought you lived on the other side of the town?"

"So I do. But Clare lives in Thanet Road. Moreton Avenue is a short cut." Martin gave her such a comical look that she subsided, laughing.

She thought again how very nice and friendly he was and what a splendid couple he and Clare would make, but Mandy seemed suddenly irritable and snapped over her shoulder crossly:

"Must you tread almost on my heels, Tony?"

"Did I? Sorry. . . ." Tony's voice sounded pre-occupied. This evening he had realized the thrill once more; the thrill that comes to an artist when an audience is absorbed and appreciative. True, he had only been a small part of the whole, but it was the same as when he performed by himself. His thoughts went again to the future, to the constant arguments with his mother regarding a career. Must he really submit, for her sake, to a routine job he didn't care about? Something in the business line she hoped for? Something by which he could earn a steady and increasing salary so that if need be he could repay her for the love and care she had given him? It seemed that all his life he must pay for the bitter blow dealt to his mother through his father's death. Well, he must soon make up his mind and his decision could not include music, except as a sideline. Of what use was it for Linda to nag him about work? What did it matter when the most he would be asked for was a violin solo at some amateur concert? For that, he knew, he would do well enough with the technique he had.

But now they were in Moreton Avenue and had

reached the Carrells' house. At the kerb was one of the most magnificent cars Tony had ever seen. Admiring the long, shining black body, the glittering chromium fittings, he came out of his reverie and gave a long low whistle. Johnny said carelessly:

"Hallo! Dad must be here still."

"I expect they all are." Linda stepped up to the lighted windows of the lounge and peered in. "Yes, your mother's here, Tony. Do come in, everybody. No, of course it isn't too many. You ought to see the place sometimes!"

They all trooped into the house as Mrs. Carrell came into the hall.

"That's right. I was hoping you'd come. Go in, won't you. I'm just making coffee. No, of course it's no trouble. . . ."

She bustled away hospitably and Linda followed her into the kitchen as soon as she had taken off her things. She peered into the large tin box at the back of the pantry. The family had nicknamed it "The Widow's Cruse" after the Bible story in which the vessel was never allowed to become empty. Biscuits and a wrapped fruit cake and tinned goods of all sorts were always to be found there.

"What shall it be, Mummy? Sardines or luncheon meat? And I'll put cheese spread on some water biscuits too, shall I?"

They whisked around and in a very short time the trolley was loaded and ready to be wheeled into the lounge. Mandy, left to entertain the visitors, jumped up to proffer cups of coffee and hand out sandwiches, but Tony, recovered now from his fit of depression, elbowed her aside.

"Decorative, but not useful; that's our Mandy," he remarked with a grin.

To his surprise Mandy, who usually took such teasing in good part, rounded on him indignantly, her face flushing.

"That's a beastly thing to say, Tony!"

For a moment there was a hint of tears in her blue eyes. Tony stared at her with a puzzled expression but before he could apologize, Martin Grant was on his feet saying gently:

"Even if it were true, Miss Mandy—which I'm sure it isn't—it is surely for us to wait upon the fair sex in return for their decorative ability. Have a sandwich?"

He smiled at Mandy so whimsically that she had to laugh. Mr. Vernon boomed heartily.

"Let's hope your wife, when you get one, Grant, will benefit from the fine feeling behind that gallant remark."

Mrs. Ryan said pathetically:

"It depends so much on the type of woman, I think. I'm afraid my husband spoiled me. But then I've never been very strong and I tire so easily. . . ."

Tony glanced at his mother rather anxiously. Was that a hint that they must not stay very long? So many times he was scolded for keeping her up too late. Watching the clock he said presently:

"What about it, Mum? Would you like to go?"

For a moment his mother looked as if the remark had displeased her, but Tony's suggestion seemed a signal for the break-up of the party and Martin and Clare got up to say they really should be going, too. In the general exodus Tony managed to get Mandy alone for a moment.

"What was the matter, Mandy? What did I do tonight?"

"Do . . .?" Her blue eyes stared back at him innocently. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do. You've been cool to me all the evening. And I don't know why you went off the deep end because I said you were decorative. You should have been pleased."

"Oh, that . . .? It was nothing. Don't pester me, Tony. Really, sometimes you're so *childish*!"

Mandy tossed her golden head and pushed past him impatiently to wave good-bye to Mr. Vernon and Johnny as they drove away, with Clare and Martin sitting in the back of the car.

"Whew . . . !" Tony recoiled in mock dismay and grinned at Linda, who had come out of the kitchen to stand beside him. "Mandy's got it in for me this evening and no mistake!"

She smiled back at him mischievously.

"Has she? Well, I expect you deserved it. Good night, Tony. It was fun this evening, wasn't it. And do remember, if you want to run through your violin music with me any time, I'd be glad. I like playing your accompaniments."

"Thanks, Linda. All right. I'm coming, Mum. 'Night, everyone!"

Pushing the gate open for his mother, Tony smiled and waved back at the little group at the open front door. The Carrells were a grand crowd and jolly good neighbours.

But young Mandy was getting a bit above herself, these days. *Childish*, was he . . .!



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# CHRISTMAS

"Good King Wenceslas looked out . . ." sang Jill in her tuneless treble as she mounted the step-ladder with a piece of holly in her hand.

"It's you who had better look out, or you'll fall," Linda admonished her laughingly. "For heaven's sake leave the higher-up bits to me."

But with the tip of her tongue protruding from the corner of her small mouth, Jill leaned forward and placed the sprig along the top of a picture, then leaned back with a satisfied nod.

"There! I did that all by myself, anyway." Rather shakily she descended, clutching thankfully at Linda's helping hand. "There's the front-door bell! Is that Daddy now, do you think?"

"It couldn't be. Mummy said his train doesn't get in until four o'clock. See who it is, there's a dear."

A moment later Tony looked into the room, his hair and his shoulders covered with a sprinkling of snow-flakes.

"Brr . . . ! It's jolly cold, isn't it. Hallo, Linda! Merry Christmas!"

"Well, what do *you* want?" Linda greeted him with gay impudence. "It isn't Christmas yet and you weren't invited until tomorrow."

"There's rudery for you! As a matter of fact Mum said that as you've kindly asked us to help eat your Christmas dinner, I'd better come and ask if there's anything I can do."

"Mummy's in the kitchen. You'd better go and ask her. And don't pinch anything!"

Tony made a grimace at her and withdrew. In the kitchen he slipped an arm round Mrs. Carrell's plump waist and pulled her, protesting, into the hall.

"Must kiss my best girl under the mistletoe," he said, saluting her soundly on the mouth.

"Gracious, Tony, you're getting to be a very masterful young man! Practising those tricks on an old woman like me, too." Mrs. Carrell gave him a little push in pretended indignation, but she patted her hair and looked pleased, just the same. Tony was almost like her own son and she was very fond of him.

Then Mandy came down the stairs. She caught Tony's look and fled shrieking, but Tony was quicker and took his toll with such enthusiasm that Mandy's cheeks were pinker than ever. Jill watched the struggle delightedly, then flung herself upon Tony, demanding the same treatment with the unselfconsciousness of a six-year-

old. Giving Tony a warm hug she kissed him more than the required once.

"I do love Christmas, don't you?" she sighed as he set her down. "I wish Daddy would come. Then it would be perfect."

"There's a taxi stopping at the gate now!" shrieked Mandy, and there was a wild rush to the door.

It was Mr. Carrell. And so hung about with bags and parcels that he looked like a veritable Christmas tree himself, as Mrs. Carrell declared.

When he had greeted his wife the girls had their turn at hugs and he held out a hand to Tony.

"My, it's good to be home. Jill, pet, let me take off this wet coat before you start clinging to me like a limpet. Here, Linda, all these parcels are to be put under the tree and not looked at until the morning. And mind, no feeling and peeping! But of course I forgot. You're too old for such childish tricks."

"I'm not so sure, sir!" Tony shook a reproachful head and removed from Linda's arms a large parcel which was certainly receiving a surreptitious investigation.

Finding that he could be of little real use and guessing that Mr. Carrell would want his family to himself, Tony took himself off, first arranging with Linda and Mandy that he would call back for them at about eight o'clock that evening.

The members of the Youth Orchestra and a few other Harbridge young people had spent the evenings of Christmas week carol-singing in aid of the local Darby and Joan Club. Tonight—Christmas Eve—would be their last expedition.

"It's going to be a white Christmas all right," Tony remarked as he opened the door and watched the big snowflakes fall from the darkened sky.

"Rather fun. Perhaps we'll get some tobogganing if it goes on long enough," Linda said hopefully, following him to the door.

"Well, see you later then, Lin." Tony vaulted the low wall between the houses and disappeared.

As Linda shut the front door she looked up at the bunch of mistletoe that swung from the hall light. Tony had never even noticed that she had been standing right beneath it. Oh well . . .

It was snowing hard when the carol-singers set out that evening. They made a real Christmas-card picture as they stood grouped around the swaying lantern, their young voices blended in harmony as they sang the old songs still loved so well. Returning after a long trudge round the town, their boxes bulging with the money so freely given on this the most open-handed day of the year, they stopped outside Miss Hallam's gate for their last visit.

As they began singing the old lady came to the lighted window and sat there listening until they had given her quite a concert. Then Eliza, obviously obeying instructions, threw open the front door and invited them all into the big front-room, whose furnishing Mandy had previously criticized. This evening, however, the room looked warm and welcoming with a big log fire in the grate and the table covered with a snowy cloth on which reposed plates of hot sausage-rolls and pies, sandwiches and cakes. Eliza hurried to the kitchen and returned with jugs full of steaming hot coffee and cocoa to fill the cups that were passed up eagerly.

"Whoever it was who thought of singing for his supper *knew something*," declared Linda, biting into a hot sausage-roll with a murmur of satisfaction.

She looked round the crowded room. Here were all the people who meant so much in her life, besides the family. School friends, the members of the orchestra, Sally and Jacqueline, Joe, Johnny, Graham and Tony, not to mention the two older friends, Martin and Clare. It was Christmas now and Mummy had said it was likely they would know where they stood before the New Year. Oh, how would she be able to bear it if they had to leave the familiar people and places and begin again in some strange new town?

A small shiver ran through her at the awful thought and Tony turned to her, his face concerned.

"You haven't caught cold, Linda? Here, have another cup of coffee."

"No, I'm all right. Of course I am. Not that I wouldn't like the coffee just the same though," she added hastily as Tony whisked it out of her reach again. "Hi, Tony, come back, you brute!"

They left the old lady at last and, calling cheery good nights and the season's wishes, dispersed to their homes. At "*twenty-three*" Jill had been bundled off to bed and now there was her stocking to fill and various odd jobs in preparation for the morning.

Creeping up to bed at last with the long bulky tube they had filled together with much laughter, Linda played Father Christmas and laid the stocking along the foot of Jill's bed. She stood there for a moment looking down at the little girl, so peacefully asleep under the shaded light, and wondered if Jill still really believed in the old legend. Linda couldn't remember just when for herself it had ceased to be a miracle and become, instead, just a bit of fun. For several years now it had stopped being even that for the two older girls, owing to the lack of small,

inexpensive gifts to suit their tastes. Now Mandy's presents and her own were all set out under the big Christmas tree in the corner of the lounge, along with their mother's and father's and the more bulky ones for Jill.

It was rather horrid in some ways, this getting older business. The growing pains were not only physical; there were times when you were all muddled up in your mind between childishness and an older and most uncomfortable feeling; as if there was something you wanted very badly, but you didn't know what it was. . . .

But what was she doing, standing here, glooming? It was Christmas Eve and if she didn't get to bed quickly she would be too tired to enjoy herself the next day. Switching on the electric bowl fire Linda hurriedly undressed and put on her pyjamas. Even then she had to linger by the window for a few more moments, drawing back the curtains and looking out across the garden. It had stopped snowing and a cold pale moon was sending its rather ghostly light across the smooth untrampled whiteness, throwing each bare branch and twig into clear relief and a new beauty.

"If I were Jacqueline . . . or Mummy . . . I'd want to paint it," Linda thought to herself. "It's so beautiful, it hurts. . . ."

Then, afraid of slipping back into a mood she considered unsuitable to the festive season, Linda hummed cheerfully a few bars of a carol and jumped into bed. Curling herself into a ball she hugged her feet to get them warm and quickly fell asleep.

Christmas morning began very early with Jill coming into Linda's bed to unpack her stocking with little cries of surprise and delight. Then breakfast and the distribution of presents followed by a flurry of

activity designed to get everything in motion for the Christmas dinner so that there would not be much to do when the family came back from church.

"Combined operations," Linda called it laughingly as Mr. Carrell stoked fires, Mandy laid the table in the dining-room and Linda and her mother fitted the turkey into the oven. Jill got under everyone's feet in an effort to be useful, but this caused more laughter than anything else as they passed her from one to the other.

They left the key next door as they went by, for Miss Hallam was always invited on Christmas Day and Eliza came in to help. Coming back to the house after the cheerful service in the holly-decorated church they found the latter in the kitchen where she reported that the turkey "looked a treat". This was a great day for Eliza. She liked work and was of the old school of servants, always insisting cheerfully that she "knew her place". Although all the Carrell family combined to relieve her as much as possible nothing pleased her more than when they declared that they couldn't do without her.

And she's such an old darling, we couldn't, was Linda's opinion as she kissed her warmly now under the mistletoe and produced the new woolly kneecaps she had knitted.

Miss Hallam had presents from everyone, too, including Jill, who proudly presented a needle-book, rather shakily embroidered.

"You can see it's an 'H' if you sort of turn it sideways," she informed the recipient earnestly.

"It's an 'H' quite clearly to me," Miss Hallam assured her solemnly. "Thank you, dear. I shall keep it always."

When she had distributed her own Christmas gifts she beckoned Linda aside and thrust a long oblong parcel into her hands.

"This is for you, dear," she said, and the old voice shook a little with pleasure and nervousness for she had been looking forward to this moment. "Open it. . . ."

With widened eyes Linda tore off the wrappings to disclose a leather case. She looked at it with an almost frightened expression and glanced at the other members of the family, who were watching her with smiling faces. Fumblingly, she threw open the lid and then gazed at the clarinet snug in its bed of silk. It gleamed with glossy black and silver and she touched it gently with her hand and withdrew it again.

"But I can't . . . I couldn't possibly . . . Oh, Miss Hallam, it's simply lovely, but . . . but . . ."

"Nonsense, child. You've given *me* pleasure enough," the old lady said gently.

Linda threw her arms round her neck and hugged her quickly, tears very near the surface. In all her wildest dreams she couldn't have imagined such a Christmas present. It scarcely seemed fair.

"Thank you . . . thank you . . . I shall work and work and try to make you proud. . . ."

Then Mrs. Ryan and Tony arrived. Tony was apparently in boisterous spirits, but his mother's face wore the plaintive expression which the Carrell family knew predicted references to a "happier time before I was left . . ." Mr. Carrell hastily bore her away to a glass of sherry and his undivided attention which cheered her so much that when at last they all sat round the big dining-table she was laughing and animated. Linda couldn't help noticing the anxious

glance Tony threw in her direction and the relief in his face as he saw that the bad mood had gone.

Roast turkey with all its proper accompaniments, steaming plum pudding dark with raisins and topped with holly; there was nothing quite like Christmas dinner, thought Linda, looking round the table happily. Old Miss Hallam in a red paper hat was blowing gaily on a squeaker while Eliza, sitting beside her mistress, sported a false nose and a yellow glengarry set jauntily on her sparse grey hair. Mrs. Ryan, in a frilled paper bonnet, looked quite pretty and exchanged favours and mottoes with the young people excitedly. In the midst of all the hubbub Mr. Carrell rose to his feet and held up his hand for silence.

"I have some news, folks," he said, "and I think this seems an appropriate time to pass it on. . . ."

Linda's heart did a double somersault. Could this be the news they had been dreading? But if it was bad, Dad wouldn't surely be telling them at Christmas dinner, and with a smile?

"The firm have decided that they can't do without me in Harbridge," he went on, putting his thumbs into his waistcoat and throwing out his chest with mock pride. But he got no further with his speech for a positive babel of noise greeted his remark. The girls shrieked with joy, Tony shouted "Cheers!" and everyone clapped and banged on the table with spoons and forks.

When the noise had died down a little Linda asked eagerly:

"What will they do without you at Northpool, Dad?"

"Well, for the past three months I've been training a man to take my place there and though the firm was

at first doubtful about him being fit to take full charge, I've finally convinced them that he's the right man. I must say it will be nice living with my family again," Mr. Carrell added, smiling, "and I wasn't really looking forward to transporting four weeping females."

"Oh, Dad!" His two elder daughters looked reproachful, but Jill declared earnestly:

"I should have cried . . . *buckets*."

Mr. Carrell patted her hand.

"Well, there's no need to think about that now. I was only teasing. I know you would all have been as cheerful as you could."

The good news gave a fillip to the already gay party and the young people became hilarious. Even the washing-up was fun. Mrs. Carrell pleaded for her crockery as Tony pranced into the kitchen with a pile of plates balanced precariously on his head.

"Everything's under control, ma'am," he assured her with an engaging smile, and she sighed resignedly and swept Miss Hallam and Mrs. Ryan into the lounge for a quiet chat.

When everything had been cleared away Jill said eagerly:

"Now we'll play games, won't we?"

"What about charades?" suggested Tony.

The others agreed and Mr. Carrell and Tony, as the only two males of the party, were given the job of picking up sides.

"You first then, sir. . . ."

"Mrs. Ryan," said Mr. Carrell promptly.

"Er . . . Mrs. Carrell."

"Miss Hallam. . . ."

Eliza refused to be drawn into the game, saying that she would much rather watch. It was Tony's turn

again. Linda held her breath but he chose Mandy and she found herself on her father's side with Jill as her opposite number. They tossed for the right to perform first and Tony's side went out. Left in the lounge the rest of the party heard sounds of feet racing up and down the stairs. Drawers and cupboards were opened and shut and the noise punctuated by whispered conversation. Linda took out her new clarinet and tried it out softly. She could still scarcely believe it was really hers. She sent another beaming smile of gratitude in Miss Hallam's direction and cradled her new possession in her arms delightedly.

"Hurry up . . .!" called Mr. Carrell gaily.

They appeared at last in every variety of costume to act a short scene depicting what seemed to be a political meeting with a great deal of interruption. After another wait there was a most unruly singing class led by a small person in a long frock and a very large hat.

"I'm the teacher," Jill assured the audience, reducing Linda to helpless giggles.

The word had only two syllables and the four in the lounge guessed wildly at what it might be while the final scene was being prepared.

"All that *doh, ray, me* business was just a blind, I think," said Mrs. Ryan thoughtfully. "Probably nothing to do with the word at all."

"What was the name of the man who was going to win the election?" asked Miss Hallam in her quiet old voice.

"Mr. Parr . . ." supplied Linda. "Parr . . . Parr . . . it could be party. We'll listen for it. Hush, here they come!"

But it was only Tony. He lifted in a pair of steps

and with a solemn expression opened the screen around them.

"Sydney Carton on the scaffold . . . '*a far, far better thing I do now . . .*'" hazarded Mr. Carrell flippantly.

Tony gave him a dignified stare.

"Nothing of the kind," he said coldly, and withdrew.

After some time he reappeared with long, stockinged legs and an improvised tunic. Mandy, wearing a blue satin nightdress with a sash and a lace milk-cover on her golden hair, slowly mounted the steps.

"But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!" declaimed Tony in a dramatic voice from below.

Mandy looked down, speaking softly:

"Good night, good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow that I shall say good night till it be morrow. . . ."

She paused and for a brief moment Linda was transported to the garden of the Capulets. Juliet had been so young and so lovely. As lovely as Mandy now, though younger of course. Only fourteen . . . it didn't seem possible. . . .

Then the illusion broke, for Tony, whose memory was not his strong point, suddenly drew from behind his back a fat volume of Shakespeare and began to hunt wildly through its pages.

"I told you I'd never remember it . . ." he grumbled under his breath.

"Here it is, you idiot . . ." snapped Mandy, snatching the book away from him and finding the place.

"Is this *all* included?" asked Mr. Carrell pathetically.

Tony frowned at his irreverence and read in a fierce voice:

"Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast.

Would I were sleep and peace, so sweet to rest!  
Hence will I to my father's ghostly cell, his help to  
crave, and my dear hap to tell' . . . what a lot of rot!"  
he finished in a gale of laughter.

"Oh dear!" Miss Hallam wiped her eyes. "What an  
unromantic generation it is!"

"What's the word? What's the word?" asked Jill,  
jumping up and down excitedly.

"I thought it might be party . . . but it didn't come  
into the last scene, did it?" Linda said.

"Yonder . . ." suggested Mr. Carrell.

"Or *parting* . . .?"

"No . . . no . . . ! We'll have to go out again if you  
don't guess," cried Jill delightedly.

"I think it might be *window*," said Miss Hallam  
quietly.

And of course it was.

"We were awfully dense not to think of it," said  
Linda, "but really the balcony scene put me right off  
being serious."

"Before we do anything else I'm going to make a  
cup of tea," declared Mrs. Carrell. "I've laughed  
until my throat's dry. . . ."

Late that night, Linda stood again by the window in  
her bedroom, looking out at the starry night. Jill,  
exhausted by excitement, rich food and a late bedtime  
had dropped off at once, but Linda was going over  
the whole day in her mind. It had been such a lovely  
time. The presents, the service, the Christmas dinner  
and the charades; the boisterous games they had  
played specially for Jill and the marvellous supper.  
But the music . . . perhaps the music had been the best  
part of all. She had played her new clarinet. . . . Dear,  
*dear* Miss Hallam. Such a dreadfully expensive present

for her to give, but Mummy said that she had been most insistent that expense should not be mentioned or even thought of. . . .

And after the clarinet playing she had changed places with Tony at the piano and accompanied him on the violin; trying to get into his mood so that he could interpret the music without her intruding. And she must have done it, because he had said afterwards:

"Thanks, Linda. You really are good at accompanying. I almost wonder you don't take it up seriously. . . ."

Oh yes, it had been a wonderful Christmas Day! And on top of everything else they didn't have to leave Harbridge after all. Linda smiled up at the shining moon happily. Everything was for the best, in the best of all possible worlds!



## CHAPTER TWELVE

# WINTER SPORT

"IF A thaw sets in before tomorrow I shall *die!*" declared Mandy extravagantly, tapping the barometer in the hall with an anxious expression.

The weather which had been cold and snowy at Christmas had afterwards turned even colder. In Harbridge toboggans were dragged out of seclusion or knocked together hastily by amateur carpenters, and now the snow on the hills just outside the town was scarred and tumbled with the daily succession of runs and spills.

In addition the lake on the Common was frozen over and all those who could beg, borrow or produce a pair of skates were making the most of this rare opportunity.

Mrs. Carrell, passing now through the hall, smiled at her eldest daughter's vehemence.

"Isn't it always the same in England? Just as one begins to get used to these temperatures the weather changes. I know they say the thaw's on the way, but it seems just as cold to *me*."

"It will be such a pity if it changes before tomorrow," Mandy said, following her mother into the kitchen. "Being Saturday there will be people on the lake all day and they're going to light it up after dark. The men are working on it now. It's Mr. Vernon's idea. They're going to make a small charge in aid of the hospital and have music and hot-dog stands and roast chestnuts and things like that."

"What fun!" said her mother in the absent-minded voice of one who has no desire to participate.

Linda, however, was enthusiastic.

"If only I could skate as well as you do, Mandy," she said enviously. "Oh well, it's fun trying and I am getting on a bit, aren't I? Well, if I'm going to be out most of tomorrow I'd better get some practice done now."

She went into the other room and, taking the new clarinet out of its case, played a few sustained notes, then frowningly changed the reed. It was annoying that good ones were so difficult to obtain and one of the hardest things to explain to her parents, who were naturally rather disturbed to see her having to discard so many in a box. Tony had mentioned that he knew someone who was bringing back some better ones from abroad. She must remember to ask him. . . .

The thought of Tony set her wondering again what she, or anyone could do to make Mrs. Ryan see reason. Why couldn't she *see* that there was no other future possible for Tony, except music? Not that Tony had been complaining. He was always so decent about

his mother. But Linda knew that he often felt disheartened and frustrated. . . .

But this wouldn't do. She must concentrate on her practice. Linda resolutely turned her thoughts away and taking a breath began tonguing some *staccato* exercises.

Saturday was a fine clear morning, but there was less of a nip in the air and Mandy and Linda agreed rather gloomily that the thaw which had been predicted was definitely on the way.

"If only it doesn't come today!" said Mandy, looking out of the window anxiously.

It was difficult not to envy those fortunate people who with no chores or duties could call the whole day their own. But Saturday morning was a busy time for the Carrell family and it was three o'clock in the afternoon before they were ready to set out.

Mandy, in a grey flared skirt and blue-and-white sweater wore on her blonde curls a cap to match. Beneath it her eyes looked very blue and bright. Linda's scarlet jacket had its matching beret perched jauntily on her black hair, while Jill in green coat and leggings brought up the rear with her father. Behind her trailed the small toboggan which Linda had laughingly declared Jill would take to bed with her at night if she could.

As they shut their gate behind them they heard Tony's shout. A moment later he joined them with Mrs. Ryan teetering along beside him, muffled to the chin in furs and swinging a pair of skates.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Carrell. Hallo, girls! And where's your mother?" Mrs. Ryan put her head on one side and her bright brown eyes snapped under the little fur cap like a squirrel's. Linda grinned.

"Mummy says she's not the outdoor type. She's got

a new novel, a good fire and some chocolate and she doesn't envy us a bit."

"Ah . . ." Mrs. Ryan sighed and slipping an arm through Tony's looked up at her tall son with an adoring expression. "But then she hasn't a young man like this to make an effort for. Only having each other does make such a difference——"

"Come on, Mum. What are we waiting for?" Tony said hastily, his face colouring. He looked like a young horse that was going to shy, thought Linda sympathetically. How silly Mrs. Ryan was sometimes! Of course it was horrid for her not having a husband, but really the things she said made one want to curl up and sink through the floor. Tony must hate it.

She made herself talk to Mrs. Ryan so that Tony should be relieved for a little while. Tony, obviously grateful, paired up with Mandy and soon the two of them were well ahead. Linda had to slow her impatient footsteps to Mrs. Ryan's pace and hoped rather bleakly that they wouldn't forget about her altogether.

When they reached the lake they found it had been enclosed by a rope. Hospital nurses, under the direction of the burly and energetic Mr. Vernon, were shaking money-boxes insinuatingly and levying a toll from the skaters as they went on to the ice.

It seemed as if everyone the Carrells knew was there. Tony and Mandy were at once surrounded by their friends; Joe Carter with Jacqueline, who was looking very pretty in lime green, Graham and several other boys, among them Johnny Vernon. In the distance Linda could see Sally skirting the edge of the lake carefully. She waved but Linda was stuck; stuck with Mrs. Ryan who, the moment she was abandoned,

would be sure to call on Tony who surely deserved a break. Even Mr. Carrell seemed oblivious to his second daughter's predicament and after giving his contribution to the rattling hospital boxes, set off with Jill and the toboggan, apparently making for the hill above.

Mrs. Ryan couldn't skate very well. Neither could Linda. They clung to each other as they ventured on to the ice, and Linda muttered, "One, two, one, two. . . ." trying to make Mrs. Ryan place her feet in some sort of order. But with little squeaks of fright Mrs. Ryan slipped and clung, making it quite impossible for Linda's own feet to obey her. It wasn't long before the inevitable happened. Together they fell with a mighty whack on the ice and lay there sprawling. Linda was laughing helplessly but Mrs. Ryan seemed on the verge of tears. Suddenly a huge figure swooped from above and a booming voice said heartily:

"Dear, dear! This will never do, little lady!"

Almost bemused, Linda sat there on the ice, watching Mr. Vernon help Mrs. Ryan to her feet and murmur over her consolingly:

"Oh, thank you . . . thanks so much . . .!" gasped Mrs. Ryan, straightening her little fur cap then clinging to the big man helplessly as even that small gesture threatened her balance.

"Now . . . just cross your hands and put them in mine . . . like that. Splendid! Try taking a turn with me. You'll very soon get the hang of it."

They glided away together, Mr. Vernon obviously sure of himself and so much at home on the ice that Mrs. Ryan was quite safe with him. Neither of them took any notice of Linda, and after a moment of indignation she saw the funny side of it and, getting

to her feet shakily, brushed herself down. Sally came gliding over to her with the wary expression of the skater who is only just beginning to master the art.

"Whatever happened? I saw you go over."

Linda giggled.

"Mrs. Ryan practically dragged me down and then left me flat. Well, Mr. Vernon's got her now and I hope he won't be regretting his chivalry. Anyway, I've done my bit."

"Let's hold hands," said Sally, "it seems safer that way somehow."

But before they had got properly started a tall figure came skating towards them and, braking expertly, Martin Grant smiled at Linda.

"Hallo there! All the world and his wife seems to be here this afternoon. Jolly, isn't it?"

Linda agreed shyly. She was still a little in awe of Martin in spite of his friendliness.

"Er . . . you remember Sally Mortimer, don't you?" she added hastily, wishing she didn't blush so easily and that introductions were less difficult to manage without embarrassment.

"Of course. You helped to sell programmes at our concert."

He was skating beside them, talking easily. Linda felt that they must look very awkward for neither she nor Sally had reached the stage where they could forget their feet or the fact that the ice was very hard to sit down upon suddenly. It was nice of Martin to talk to them, but . . . oh dear, they were very nearly over then!

"Steady . . ." cautioned Martin, but he did not move away.

With some thankfulness Linda spied Mandy just

ahead of them. A little apart from the rest of the group she was gracefully carving a figure of eight on the already scarred surface of the ice. They stopped to watch her and as she finished the figure Martin clapped softly.

Mandy turned abruptly and saw them, her cheeks pink with the exercise, her eyes shining. Tiny golden tendrils of hair curled upwards round her cap enchantingly.

"Hallo! I didn't realize that I had an audience," she exclaimed laughingly.

"A most admiring one," Martin told her, and Linda said enviously:

"If only I could skate half as well!"

All at once from the other side of the lake the loudspeakers attached to the big radiogram struck up a lilting waltz. At the same moment someone touched a switch and coloured fairy lights twinkled from the trees to transform the whole scene. The moving figures on the glistening ice seemed to take on a new grace, the frosted branches of the bare trees assuming a fresh beauty.

"Will you dance, Miss Mandy?" asked Martin, and without waiting for her answer he put an arm around her slim waist and swung her into the middle of the lake with him.

"Why on earth doesn't he just call her Mandy?" asked Linda as she and Sally stood watching them for a few moments. She turned to Sally with a rueful smile.

"Well, we can't hope to copy that but let's go round the lake together again. I got so nervous with Martin watching, we shall do better on our own. Oh heavens, it looks so easy when they do it!" She paused. "I wonder where Clare is this afternoon?"

"I haven't seen her. Oh look, there's Mrs. Ryan again and Mr. Vernon's still with her! He must be a very patient man!"

"Sh . . . here comes Tony . . ." Linda said, hailing him as he raced round the ice with Joe Carter at his heels. They stopped when they saw the two girls and good-naturedly took them for a turn, and presently, meeting Jacqueline with Graham and Johnny they were all strung out in a long line, the experts carrying the novices along at a speed that made them squeak with fright and beg for mercy.

Mandy, still waltzing with Martin, felt as if she were in a dream; a dream from which she did not particularly wish to wake. The strong arm around her waist held her gently yet firmly so that her feet followed Martin's with no effort at all. At the local ice-rink Mandy had taken a few lessons with a professional, but she did not consider herself an expert dancer. Now, however, she felt that she could do nothing wrong; that wherever Martin led she could follow. Was he, *could* he be enjoying it as much as she was?

And then, over Martin's shoulder, Mandy saw Clare coming towards them with a smile and obviously going to stop and speak. The spell was broken. She missed a step, her foot slipped sideways and she would have lost her balance had not Martin's arm tightened about her. He said:

"Sorry. I expect that was my fault. We were getting on so well!"

He hadn't seen Clare yet. Mandy said hurriedly:

"It wasn't your fault. It was mine. I . . . I think I can see Tony waving to me. Perhaps I'd better join him now, if you don't mind. Thanks ever so much for the dance. . . ."

Martin released her with a rather puzzled look.

"Perhaps I've tired you . . . Oh hallo, Clare, when did you arrive?"

"Good afternoon, Miss Truett. Excuse me, won't you?" Mandy interrupted hurriedly and skated away almost blindly to the other side of the lake. It was not true that she had seen Tony. It had been an excuse because she *was* suddenly tired, so tired that she had been afraid she would disgrace herself. Stumbling off the ice Mandy sat down on one of the benches which had been arranged around the side. And suddenly she heard someone calling her name. Looking up, she saw that it was her father and Jill.

"Hallo. . . ." She smiled at them a little wanly and Mr. Carrell gave her a searching look.

"Are you all right, dear? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

Mandy smiled again faintly and brushed her hand across her forehead.

"I've got a bit of a headache, that's all."

"Oh dear, what a pity! Will you be all right to stay, do you think? Perhaps you'd like to come home with us. I'm taking Jill now."

Mandy stood up. In the distance she could see Martin dancing now with Clare.

"Perhaps I will. . . ." As she hesitated Tony came skating over to them from the other side of the lake.

"Why, Mandy, you can't be going yet? The fun's only just started. They're getting the refreshments ready now and we're all going to have ours together. Mr. Vernon has commandeered one of the workmen's braziers. He's an awful sport."

Mandy looked uncertain. It did seem a pity to miss all the fun and she felt better already. In fact she

couldn't think now why she had been so silly. She glanced apologetically at her father.

"I think I will stay, Dad. I guess if I have a hot drink I'll be quite all right."

Mr. Carrell gave her a puzzled look.

"I don't know whether I ought to let you stay when you were looking so poorly only a moment ago. Well, all right then, if you're sure, but do take care. Look after her, Tony."

"I will, sir, honestly. Good-bye, sir. Good-bye, Jill."

He crossed his hands with Mandy's and they skated away together.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### FRIENDS AND RELATIONS

"WELL, I tell you I detest the chap," Tony declared, giving an angry flip to the music on the stand in front of him. "Mr. Vernon is at least a worker, so he deserves to be successful. Johnny just thinks his Dad's money gives him an entry into everything without any trouble on his part."

Linda twirled on the piano stool and grinned at Tony rather wickedly.

"It obviously doesn't. Not into your good books anyway. I think you've got a bee in your bonnet about Johnny. He isn't such a bad sort really."

"Well, I suppose it makes it so much worse having Mum keep ramming him down my neck. Such a nice musical friend for me." Tony mimicked his mother's honeyed tones, then snorted disgustedly. "Musical

be blowed! Poor Mum just doesn't understand. He can't play for toffee."

Linda giggled.

"Perhaps someone has told him so at last. Haven't you heard? He's left the orchestra and taken up Art instead."

"No . . . ! Who told you?"

Linda pursed her mouth meaningly.

"Jacqueline. She said he joined last week."

Tony looked startled.

"Because of Mandy?"

"Mandy doesn't go to the Art School in the evenings. No, because of Jacqueline, you boob! Haven't you noticed the way the wind is blowing in that quarter lately? From some points of view it might have been better if it *had* been because of Mandy. She's not all that serious about Art. But Jacqueline is. She won't have much patience with someone who only takes it up as a craze. Poor Johnny."

It seemed to Linda that Tony's face wore a relieved expression. No doubt he was glad that Johnny had switched his attentions away from Mandy. It might even make him like Johnny better. But when he spoke he did not mention that. He only said with a grin:

"Poor Johnny indeed! Do the chap good to be taken down a peg. Wonder if Mum knew about that all the time? Mr. Vernon's probably told her that he wants Johnny to go into the business and that's right up her street. Maybe she thinks that if I got friendly with Johnny I'd be persuaded into it, too."

There was an unusually bitter note in Tony's voice and Linda said sympathetically:

"She's still dead against you trying for the College?"

Tony nodded. He said moodily:

"And always will be, I guess. Wish I could go into the Army when the other chaps do. As it is, I leave school in July and I've got to make my choice from one of the delightful projects Mum's lined up for me. It'll be the Bank, I suppose. . . ."

Linda was silent. The asthma Tony had suffered from as a child scarcely bothered him now, but it was still just enough to keep him from doing quite what other people did. If you were a boy, she supposed it must be hard to accept the fact that you weren't quite like the other fellows. All the same if only Mrs. Ryan would be sensible about the music, Tony might not have minded so much; might even have been glad, in a way, that he was free to take up serious study at once. There was nothing she could say, however. With her, Tony might let himself go and grumble a bit, but he would brook no criticism of his mother.

At that moment there was a knock on the front door, and a moment later Sally put her head into the room. Linda said hastily:

"Oh, Sally, would you mind frightfully? I won't be finished for about ten minutes. I promised Tony I'd run through this with him and . . . and we've been talking . . ."

She struck a chord and Tony, looking rather white and withdrawn, lifted his violin to his chin. Sally hesitated for a minute wondering if she was supposed to wait in the room, but the atmosphere did not seem inviting. She nodded and shutting the door softly, drifted into the other room where Mrs. Carrell sat alone, sewing.

"Hallo, my dear!" The warm smile that Mrs. Carrell kept for all the young people greeted Sally's entrance. "Linda keeping you waiting? Sit down and

talk to me. Mr. Carrell is out for the evening and I hate darning in silence, but there wasn't anything I wanted to listen to on the radio."

Sally perched uneasily on the arm of a chair. She smiled faintly but her voice held a dejected note.

"What shall I talk about?"

Mrs. Carrell threw her a keen glance, then she said briskly:

"Well, you might tell me what's going on in that mind of yours. I'd be interested, you know, and I've a hunch that there's something worrying you a bit."

"Oh dear . . . was I looking sour? I'm sorry."

"Not sour. Just a trifle wistful. Could I help?"

"It's nothing really . . ." Sally hesitated, then the words came out in a despairing rush. "It's just that . . . that sometimes I feel so hopelessly *ordinary*!"

She gave Mrs. Carrell a challenging look as though daring her to smile, but her friend's mother only said quietly:

"In what way, dear?"

"Oh, you know. . . . There's Linda and Tony musical, and Mandy and Jacqueline artistic. Most of the girls I know have some outstanding talent or are going in for something unusual, but I can't think of a thing I want to do, or that I'd be particularly good at . . . I expect I'll just be a shorthand typist. . . ."

There was such despair in Sally's voice that Mrs. Carrell had a hard job to keep back a smile. But she knew that Sally was in deadly earnest, so she merely said lightly:

"And what's wrong with that? So long as you're a *good* shorthand typist. . . ."

Sally sighed.

"Linda thinks it would be awful. . . ."

"That's because Linda badly wants to do something else. But it's very silly of her if she's given the impression that there's anything detrimental in an office job."

"Oh, she didn't exactly. . . . Of course I'm quite good at French, but Mummy and Daddy feel that they couldn't afford all those years at College for a degree and I'm not really brainy. So an office job seems the only thing. . . ."

"And quite an interesting thing it could be." Mrs. Carrell smiled. "Everyone isn't given the same choice in life. It would be dull indeed if they were. For how would industry and commerce progress if everyone tooted flutes and painted pictures? But look, Sally, if you're not keen on an office job I'm sure there are lots of other things you could do."

Sally looked happier. There was even a little smile on her face as she confessed:

"I am quite keen really . . . I'd just got it into my head that I had to be ashamed. But you've made me feel such a lot better about it. . . ."

She broke off as the door opened and Linda popped her head in.

"Oh, good! You're still here, Sally. It was so quiet I thought you must have gone." She crossed the room and dropped on to the hearthrug in front of the fire. Holding her hands to the blaze her eyes searched Sally's face a little anxiously. "You didn't mind waiting? Tony and I had wasted such a lot of time talking and I thought we'd never get started at all."

"Of course I didn't." Sally smiled at Linda impishly. "I've just been telling your mother how humble poor stupid little me feels with all you clever people around."

"How absolutely absurd!" Linda said indignantly. "You aren't a bit stupid. You're . . . you're . . ."

Words seemed to fail her and Sally burst out laughing.

"There you are! You can't find anything nice to say about me. Oh well, I really should be going. I only came to ask you what the Geometry prep was. I had to go to the Head this afternoon, you know, and I didn't get it down."

Linda rose from the floor in one swift movement and thrust her arm through Sally's as she got up.

"Couldn't you stop . . . ? I thought you'd have finished your prep. I did mine directly I came in. Look, I'll tell you the Geometry and then you can do it here. Then we could have a chat. . . ."

"Can't be did." Sally said regretfully. "I didn't bring the book, and in any case I told Mummy I'd be back in time to take Nigger for a run."

They left the room together and a moment later Linda came back into the room, alone. She seated herself on the hearthrug and sat there silently, looking into the fire. At last she said remorsefully:

"I was beastly to Sally this evening, wasn't I? . . . wasn't I?" she repeated when her mother did not immediately answer.

"I think perhaps you were just a little unkind," Mrs. Carrell agreed quietly.

"I didn't mean to be. I never thought. . . . I ought to be hung, drawn and quartered, because she's such a dear!" Linda burst out passionately.

Mrs. Carrell looked up from her sewing, a faint smile curving her lips at Linda's vehemence.

"I'm very fond of Sally."

"What was she talking to you about?" asked Linda curiously. "I thought you both looked kind of deedy when I came in. Was it about me?"

"No, of course not. Sally was talking about the future; her future," Mrs. Carrell said lightly.

Linda sighed.

"It's funny, isn't it. Sally's parents would be terribly glad if only she had an idea what she wanted to do; whatever it was." She paused, then went on stormily, "And there's that idiot of a Mrs. Ryan——"

"Linda——!"

"Well, that silly of a Mrs. Ryan, if you like. She has a talented son like Tony and she can't see that he'd be *wasted* in a bank!"

"Who's been robbing a bank?" asked a gay voice, and Mandy swept into the room in a swirl of blue net from her lovely golden head to her little silver slippers.

Linda regarded her gloomily.

"Daddy has, or will have to, I imagine. I just don't see how he can manage without."

"Oh, don't be mean, Linda! It's the only new dance dress I've had this year and I did help with my Christmas money, even if I did exceed my allowance."

"Let's see, who is it tonight, dear? Joe, Graham or Tony?" Mrs. Carrell asked mildly.

Mandy pushed up a shining curl and said gaily:

"All of them. At least, as you should remember, it's Jennifer Thompson's birthday party, but she's roped in every boy she even knows slightly."

"Tony's going?" Linda said incredulously.

Mandy nodded carelessly as she peered into the glass above the mantelpiece and flicked her small nose with a puff.

"M'm . . . Jennifer met him at the Art School party last Christmas."

"He never said a word to me about it," Linda

remarked bitterly. "I thought he was hurrying home to practise. . . ."

"Gracious, Lin, can't you give the poor chap a break? I don't wonder he doesn't tell you when he's going out. You're always nagging."

"I'm not! Anyway . . ." Linda choked and subsided, staring into the fire and willing the tears not to rise.

"I can hear the boys. 'Bye and good night, darling." Mandy dropped a light kiss on her mother's head. "You needn't wait up. I've got a key. And don't stay awake, either. Just go to sleep and forget your frivolous daughter."

Mrs. Carrell gave a blue frill a skilful tweak and patted a fold into place.

"That I shan't be able to do, as you should know. But have a good time, darling. You look very nice."

Mandy slung a little white cape round her shoulders and moved to the door. Looking back at her younger sister's averted face she said uneasily:

"I wish you were coming, Lin. But you know how it is. I guess Jennifer had all sorts of heart-searchings, but she just had to leave some of the girls out. Anyway, you never said a word when I showed you the invitation."

Linda did not turn her head or answer. Behind her back Mandy made a little grimace at her mother and, blowing her another kiss, swept out of the room. A moment later they heard the front door bang behind her.

"She's left her dance-bag," Mrs. Carrell said quickly. "Run after her, Linda."

Linda leaped to her feet, seized the little silver bag and dashed out of the room.

"Mandy . . .!" She flung open the door again and

shrieked after her sister's fairylike figure as it moved towards the battered old car which stood waiting at the gate. Mandy turned and, running back, took the bag from Linda's hand.

"Oh, Lin darling, thanks awfully! How simply dreadful if I'd had to go with a shiny nose all the evening."

She gave Linda's hand a little squeeze and Linda said breathlessly:

"Have a lovely time, Mandy."

"Thanks. I'll . . . I'll bring you back a balloon."

They both giggled and a moment later the car door slammed and they were away on a chorus of good-byes. In the back seat of the car Linda could see Tony squashed in between Joe and Jacqueline. Graham had borrowed his father's car and was driving, with Mandy beside him.

Linda went slowly back into the house and resumed her favourite seat on the hearthrug. She gave a great sigh.

"Sometimes I think I get nastier and nastier," she said flatly.

"Nonsense, dear. It's natural you should wish you had been going, too," Mrs. Carrell said soothingly, "but Jennifer is just that much older. You wait. Your turn will come."

"I'm waiting," said Linda gloomily.

At that moment the knocker on the front door banged three times in an urgent manner and then the door-bell shrilled fiercely.

"Heavens, surely that's not Mandy back again!" exclaimed Linda, jumping to her feet.

But it was not Mandy. It was Sally. She came into the room like a whirlwind, a small brown dog leaping excitedly at the end of its lead.

"Oh, Mrs. Carrell . . . Linda . . . you don't mind Nigger coming in, do you, only I said I'd take him for a run and I just had to come and tell you the news . . .!" Sally paused and took a deep and very necessary breath. Mrs. Carrell patted the seat beside her and told her smilingly:

"Take your time, dear. Here, Nigger, old boy, have a piece of chocolate and settle down while your missus tells us all about it. Now, Sally. . . ."

"Well, you see, when I got home . . . and it was the most amazing coincidence after what we had been talking about and you saying everything would come right and all that . . . the parents had been talking over a letter which apparently arrived this morning. It was from Madame Hamard——"

"Who's she? Oh, I know . . . the French lady who came over last year and then sent you that marvellous parcel from France," Linda interrupted, nodding her head knowingly.

"Yes. That's right. Well, it seems she . . . she sort of liked me . . ." Sally looked quite apologetic, "and she's got the most wonderful suggestion. Her husband has a factory in Paris, you know, and they do a lot of business with Daddy here. Well, the suggestion is that I should take a six-months' secretarial course here in England and then go to Paris and Monsieur Hamard will have me in the export department of his office for another six months so that I can polish up my French. And I'm to stay with them. In Paris . . .!"

"Oh, Sally . . .!" Linda gazed at her friend almost in awe. Could this be the shy and retiring Sally who always seemed to go out of the way to stress her ordinariness; this transformed eager person ready to leave home for a strange land and embrace all

sorts of new experiences that would make the usually more adventurous Linda think twice?

"Yes. Isn't it all simply marvellous? You see, Mrs. Carrell, it will be so awfully good for my French, living in a real French family. And, do you know, Madame Hamard said in her letter that she thought my accent was awfully good and that if it hadn't been for me being able to talk French with her a bit she wouldn't have enjoyed her visit to England nearly as much."

Sally paused with a rapt expression that seemed slightly to worry Nigger, who put his wet little nose into her lap and gazed at her with mournful eyes and a drooping tail.

"Sally dear, I think it's wonderful news. I'm so glad for you, and I'm sure you'll make a success of it."

Mrs. Carrell gave Sally a warm hug, and Nigger, obviously feeling the moment of tension was over, leaped thankfully into the air with excited barks.

"Down, Nigger! Yes, all right. You'll have your walkies in just a moment." Sally stroked the smooth brown body and stood up. "Honestly, I mustn't stay. But I just had to come and tell you."

"I'm very glad you did." Linda went with her friend to the door. Then she said abruptly: "Mandy's gone to Jennifer's birthday party, you know. Tony, too."

"Yes, the car passed me just now and I saw your Mr. Grant going into the hall," Sally said casually, obviously incapable of thinking of much else but her rosy future. Linda renounced her own claim to sympathy and said again:

"Good night, Sally. I'm so awfully bucked about your news."

She stood at the open door watching Sally's figure

disappearing down the road. Yes, of course she was glad for Sally. Why couldn't she *be* glad then and not have this bleak little feeling of depression? Wasn't she, too, going in for the thing which interested her most?

Going back into the house she said abruptly:

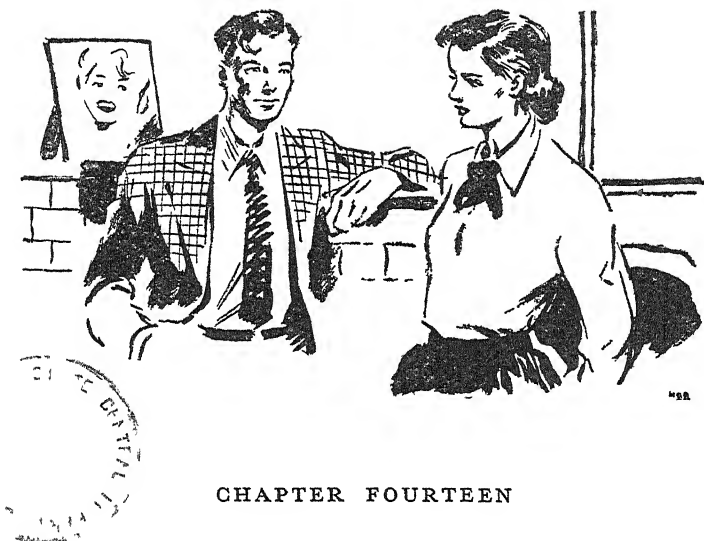
"Mummy, I know it's late but do you mind if I play for a bit?"

"No, of course not. We'll switch on the electric fire again and I'll come and listen if I may. The evenings always seem so long when your father's out."

The clarinet somehow did not seem to fit into Linda's mood tonight. Seating herself at the piano she turned over the music for a few moments with a dissatisfied air. Then suddenly making up her mind she set the book of Beethoven Sonatas on the stand and struck the first grand glorious chords of the *Pathétique*. Following the solemn opening her fingers flew swiftly over the keys in the mounting crescendoes of the swifter movement, and all her unhappiness and vague dissatisfaction seemed to flow away in this inspiring orgy of sound.

Mrs. Carrell sighed softly to herself and then smiled.

Something had disturbed the child but it was passing now. When this was over Linda would be her own bright self again.



#### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### IT'S NOT TOO LATE!

"WELL, I think it's a stupid attitude," Linda said crossly, "when there's still just a chance that your mother may relent."

Tony passed his bow up and down the strings of his violin to produce a howl like a cat in pain. His mouth had an obstinate line. Opening his violin case he fitted in the instrument and closing it again with a snap, strode across the room. At the door he paused and glanced back at Linda. Something in her dejected attitude touched him and going back to her he ruffled her hair and grinned.

"Cheer up, Lin! You don't have to look like a wet week on my behalf. I'm happy enough."

Linda sighed.

"But it's such a waste. And as I was saying——"

"Now that's enough." Tony's mouth tightened again. "You're a good pal, Lin, and I know you mean well, but I've made up my mind. I'll go on playing when I feel like it—I won't be able to help doing that, anyway. But sweat over beastly scales and exercises like you do, I will not. If I can't be a professional I'm at least going to enjoy myself."

He flung out of the room and Linda stared after him miserably. Why couldn't she leave Tony alone and get on with her own business? She didn't do any good keeping on about his practising. No wonder Tony preferred Mandy's company.

Getting up from the piano seat Linda moved to the window and stood there looking out at the front garden. The almond blossom was just coming into bloom and the first bulbs were flowering. Almost idly she noticed that Mr. Vernon's great black car was again parked outside the Ryans' house and she wondered if Johnny had come with his father. Tony would wish he had stayed with her if that were so, for even though Johnny had given up music, Tony was no nearer to liking him.

Returning to the piano stool Linda sat there, turning over in her mind an idea which had just occurred to her. Someone had once said in her hearing that Mrs. Ryan was a "man's woman", and it certainly did seem as if Tony's mother was the sort of person who took notice of a man's counsel. Even Linda's own father had been known to influence her sometimes, when Mrs. Carrell had been unable to make any impression at all.

Obviously Mrs. Ryan and Mr. Vernon were friendly. And Mr. Vernon seemed a decent sort. He had been most encouraging to the Youth Orchestra and through

it had become more interested in music. So that if he knew that it was Mrs. Ryan's fault that Tony could not have the career he wanted and was obviously destined for, might he not be willing to put in a plea for him?

Linda squared her shoulders resolutely. Yes, if the opportunity ever occurred she would put it to him, herself.

The opportunity occurred sooner than she expected. That very Saturday afternoon she was on the way to Sally's house for tea when the sound of a klaxon horn made her turn her head. The big black car was at the kerb beside her and Mr. Vernon waved and called genially:

"Can I drop you anywhere, lady?"

Sally's house was not more than five minutes away but remembering her resolve, Linda accepted eagerly. It was only when she was seated beside Mr. Vernon's great bulk and the car was purring smoothly along the road that she realized what he might think of her request. She gave her companion a look so fraught with hesitation and embarrassment that he had to laugh.

"Gracious, Linda, you looked at me as if you were going to ask for the half of my kingdom and then thought better of it."

Linda bit her lip. It was so near the truth that she could think of nothing to say.

"Here's . . . this is Sally's house . . ." she faltered, and the great car slid to a standstill beside the kerb. Mr. Vernon turned in his seat and faced her.

"Something on your mind?" he asked gently.

Linda took a deep breath. She would have to be bold for Tony's sake. But it was going to be awful;

much harder than she had imagined when the idea first occurred to her.

"It's about Tony . . ." she said shakily, "and please don't laugh or tell anyone else if I tell you about it."

"You can trust me," said Mr. Vernon seriously.

After the first halting sentences it was easier. And soon the words were pouring out as Linda explained what music had always meant to Tony; to them both. How secretly they had planned years and years ago to go to the College together and how Mrs. Ryan had been horrified when the plan was revealed to her.

"You see," explained Linda earnestly, "she feels that Tony ought to earn money as soon as possible because he's all she's got. But there are things more important than money, aren't there? And for someone to be frustrated all their life in a bank when they'd always wanted to be a first-rate musician is awful, isn't it?"

She glanced at him appealingly. Mr. Vernon said slowly:

"So that's what is the matter with the young man, is it?"

"Yes," said Linda simply. Then she added anxiously: "But it wouldn't do any good for Mrs. Ryan to give in sort of grudgingly. Because Tony's terribly fond of his mother and would *know*. . . ."

She sighed, realizing afresh what an impossible task she was setting Mr. Vernon. Perhaps he might be able to persuade Mrs. Ryan to give in, but *ungrudgingly* . . .? She waited for him to break the silence, and at last he said:

"I'll see what I can do, Linda. There's something I want to ask Mrs. Ryan myself and it's just possible it may have some bearing on the matter." He glanced at

Linda quickly and then hurried on: "Now I want *you* to do something for *me*. . . ."

Linda looked startled, then she laughed uneasily. Was Mr. Vernon making fun of her? But no, his face was quite serious as he said:

"I'm a bit worried about Johnny. I'd almost welcome it if he had, like Tony, some definite talent, some definite object in view. He just gets craze after craze, and up to now I've let him have his head. But I . . . want him in the business. That's what I worked for."

He sighed and Linda was silent. She saw a mental picture of Johnny, carelessly transferring his interests from one thing to another; never serious; always confident that his father's money would smooth his path. Yes, she could see that it might be worrying for a parent. But what could *she* do about it?

"I'd like you to try and get him to give up this Art business," Mr. Vernon said now. "He hasn't any special talent for that any more than he had for music, or for acting, which was the stunt before that. I don't know many of his friends so I'd like your help. The boys don't seem to get on very well together or I might have asked Tony to see what he could do."

A good thing he hadn't, thought Linda. Then, seeing a curtain move in the window of Sally's house she realized that her friend must be wondering whatever she was doing, sitting in the car all this time. She said earnestly:

"I'll try, really I will, Mr. Vernon. Only . . . Johnny and I aren't awfully friendly, you know. I mean, he's more Mandy's friend . . . and Jacqueline's." Remembering this latter fact and what it involved, she added

shyly: "I don't think you need worry very much about the Art craze. I guess it won't last very long."

"Well, I mustn't keep you, my dear. Glad we had this chat."

Mr. Vernon squeezed Linda's hand in his huge paw and she jumped out of the car and stood on the pavement waving as the big car slid away again. What a nice person Johnny's father was!

She went into the house where she was easily able to sidetrack Sally's curiosity with a question about the new life. Sally had left school and was now taking a secretarial course at a local College. She seemed quite a different person these days and was looking forward eagerly to her visit to Paris in the coming autumn.

All through the following week Linda wondered whether Mr. Vernon had met with any success; or whether he had even tried at all. With the College examinations in July looming nearer and nearer her own time was very much occupied and she didn't see how she was going to tackle Johnny. From Mandy she heard that Jacqueline had been snubbing him pretty thoroughly. So far, so good. If only Johnny wouldn't persist perhaps she wouldn't have to interfere.

"Jacqueline's frightfully bucked," Mandy said. "Apparently she's going to get a grant which will let her go back to full time at the Art School. Mrs. Marshall managed it through her old school."

"But I thought her aunt wasn't sympathetic," Linda remarked.

"Well, she wasn't at first. But Jacqueline says she's been awfully understanding lately, and I think she was sort of . . . worried to think Jacqueline couldn't have her chance. . . ."

Mandy stared out of the window with a dreamy expression and suddenly she said almost shyly:

"Linda . . . I've been thinking. Do you think I could take up the violin? You don't have to play so awfully well to join the orchestra, do you?"

Linda stared at her incredulously.

"But whatever for? We've got heaps of violins. And you've never been in the least interested in music. . . ."

To Linda's surprise Mandy turned very pink, and retorted indignantly:

"That's an awfully mean thing to say, Linda. Of course I'm interested. Just because I don't keep on and on about it like you do . . .!"

She flounced out of the room but not before Linda had seen the tears in her eyes. Linda sat there, bewildered and rather miserable. Perhaps she shouldn't have said it like that, but surely Mandy didn't think it was necessary to *copy* Tony? Then she could only remember that Mandy had looked upset and that it was her fault. At last she went in search of her.

"Honestly, I didn't mean to be nasty, Mandy. I was just sort of surprised. It takes such ages to learn the violin, too. I'll tell you what. Mr. Vernon's talking about giving the orchestra some tymps—that's drums, you know—and we'll be wanting someone——"

"Thank you very much," interrupted Mandy rather acidly. "It doesn't matter. It was just an idea. But as it seems such a peculiar one, forget it."

And nothing Linda could say or do would change her attitude. Mandy did not mention the subject again and got into a temper if Linda did. It was all so unlike Mandy. And very puzzling.

But Linda had quite enough on her mind without

worrying too much about it. The days were slipping by and still she had not contacted Johnny. She took to going out of her way to pass the Art School, and was at last rewarded one evening by seeing him leave the building with Jacqueline.

Hoping to catch him alone later, Linda kept out of sight and followed them down the road. They seemed to be arguing and all at once Jacqueline tossed her head and swerving away from Johnny abruptly, jumped on to the step of a passing bus. Johnny stood there looking after her with a discomfited look on his face and a moment later Linda hailed him.

"Hallo . . ." she said rather awkwardly.

"Oh . . . hallo, Linda." Johnny turned and they walked along together in silence.

Now that she had him to herself, Linda could think of no way of carrying out Mr. Vernon's request. She couldn't just jump into the subject and after all she didn't know Johnny awfully well. . . .

Stealing a sideways glance at Johnny's gloomy face she felt suddenly sorry for him. It wasn't his fault that he was rather spoilt. It was his father's. With only sympathy in her voice she said:

"You're fed up about something. I . . . I guess I'll be saying good-bye."

Johnny threw her a startled glance. It was as if he had forgotten that she was even there. Then he said:

"No . . . don't go, Linda . . ." He hesitated, then went on savagely. "I don't know who Jacqueline thinks she is! Do you know what she said?"

"No. What . . . ?" asked Linda rather nervously. She thought she could guess. And if she was right, here was her opportunity if only she could have the courage to take it.

"She said that I couldn't draw or paint for toffee. And that I only joined the Art School because she was there!"

It was so absolutely right that Linda giggled. She just couldn't help it. Johnny turned on her indignantly, and then something in Linda's convulsive efforts to straighten her face and look solemn tickled his own sense of humour. His face crumpled into laughter and soon both of them were wiping their eyes and doubling up in the most undignified way.

"Oh dear . . . !" said Linda, gasping.

"Hi, you'll be in the road in a moment!" Johnny clutched her arm and steered her to safety, and somehow he did not relinquish it. With arms still linked they strolled along together companionably and presently Johnny admitted with a rueful grin:

"All right. So it was true. Jacqueline's a jolly pretty girl. But I've finished with her. . . ."

"And with Art, too, I suppose?" Linda suggested wickedly.

For a moment she thought Johnny was offended, he was silent so long. Then he said gloomily:

"I suppose so. I'm just a dud at everything I take up, anyway."

"Perhaps you haven't found the right thing yet," Linda said earnestly. "I mean, you might be suited for something quite different from what you think."

"Such as . . . ?" Johnny asked hopefully.

"Well . . . your father's a very good business man. Perhaps you take after him," Linda suggested daringly.

"But that's just the point. Because he's so good he'd expect too much of me. I know he would. And that's why I won't try."

"That's ridiculous," declared Linda, "like cutting

off your nose to spite your face. You might be going to make pots of money. You certainly won't do that in any of the Arts."

"I suppose not."

They paused at the corner of Moreton Avenue and he gazed at Linda thoughtfully. It seemed to him that he had never noticed before how attractive the younger Carrell girl was, her black hair falling softly round her small pointed face with its big dark eyes. He said impulsively:

"I say, Linda, what about coming to the flicks tomorrow night? There's a Bob Hope at the Odeon."

Linda could feel herself blushing.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly, "but I'm going in for the Royal College of Music exam, you know, and I have to work like anything."

"Every night?"

"Well . . . there's one night a week for orchestra practise and then prep. . . ."

"The orchestra . . ." said Johnny thoughtfully. "Say, Linda, do you think they'd take me back?"

"But I thought you'd given up music . . ." Linda hesitated. There was a look in Johnny's eye and she found herself blushing again as she realized that Johnny, who had transferred to Art for Jacqueline's sake, was now ready to transfer back to music with a little encouragement from herself. She said firmly: "Now remember, Johnny, you're going to make pots of money following your father's footsteps. Look, I really must be going. Good-bye."

She turned and walked swiftly towards her house before he could protest further. Looking back from the gate she could see him still standing there, a forlorn

expression on his face. But she hardened her heart. She really hadn't time for him.

Late that evening there was a tap on the front door of the Carrells' house. Mandy, going to open it, was surprised to see Mrs. Ryan standing there with such an excited expression on her face that Mandy's mind flew immediately to trouble.

"Mummy and Dad are in the lounge. Is there anything the matter?"

"No, dear, of course not . . . not exactly the *matter*. But I'll go in, shall I? I have news. News for you all. . . ."

Mrs. Ryan hurried into the lounge and crossing the room to Mrs. Carrell threw herself down on the settee beside her and held out her left hand dramatically to show a large solitaire diamond ring on the third finger.

"My dear . . . I came to tell you first . . . my very dearest friend," she said in a voice that shook. "John and I are engaged!"

Mrs. Carrell exchanged a triumphant look with her husband. Hadn't she declared this was going to happen, weeks ago? She put her arms round Mrs. Ryan and kissed her warmly.

"Oh, Betty, I'm so very glad! Look, children, isn't this good news? Come and wish Mrs. Ryan happiness."

John . . . ? John . . . ? Linda looked at Mandy anxiously. Who on earth was this man who was going to set himself up as a stepfather to Tony? Then suddenly it came to her.

"Mr. Vernon . . ." she said slowly.

"Of course," said her mother, smiling. "Hadn't you noticed?"

Mechanically, Linda kissed their neighbour and

made the conventional remarks. All the time her mind was in a panic for Tony; Tony who had not come with his mother to give them the news and was probably simply hating the idea. And Johnny . . . ? Now Johnny and Tony would be brothers. They didn't even *like* each other. . . .

Mrs. Ryan was saying complacently:

"Yes, of course it will make a great difference to my life. Tony and I will be moving in to John's house directly after the wedding. Such a comfort to throw all my burdens on a man's shoulders and not to have to feel so *alone*. . . . Yes, of course I know Tony's been a dear boy, but it isn't quite the same. Well, if Tony persists in wanting a musical career now he can have it, for it certainly won't be a question of money in the future. . . ."

Mrs. Ryan gave a satisfied sigh and beamed at the company. Linda sprang forward.

"Oh, Mrs. Ryan, does Tony know that? Have you told him he can take up music if he likes?"

"Well, no . . . I've told him my news, of course, and I thought he was a little strange about it. Scarcely said a word of congratulation and wouldn't come in with me to tell you all," Mrs. Ryan said in an aggrieved voice. "So I left him to digest it and I'm hoping he'll be nicer about it when I get back."

Linda twisted her hands together, her voice pleading.

"Please . . . oh, please may I go and tell him?"

"Yes, dear. Go and tell him if you like. I'm afraid the dear boy is a little selfish. He'll probably be more interested in his own affairs than in his mother's." Mrs. Ryan sighed, then brightened again as she held out her hand and showed the ring once more. "You do

like it, dear?" she asked Mrs. Carrell. "I thought of a cluster, but this is rather lovely. . . ."

Linda flew out of the house and banged her signal note on the knocker of the house next door. For a long moment there was no answer, then Tony opened it a few inches and glowered at her.

"Oh, it's you. . . ."

"Yes. Let me come in, Tony." Linda almost pushed past him and he followed her into the front room. "Your mother's just told me the news. Don't look so gloomy, Tony. It's *good* news."

"I suppose so." Tony's voice was dejected. "Mr Vernon's a decent sort and all that. And Mum will have someone to look after her and see that she doesn't have any money troubles. All the same, it's a bit hard having to swallow a stepfather at my age. And what's worse, I'll have to swallow a step-brother, too!"

Linda nodded.

"I guessed that would be worrying you. But Johnny's quite a decent chap really, and if only he'd give up all these silly crazes on girls and settle down to learning his father's business I guess it would be better for him. Anyway, why should you worry?" She paused triumphantly. "*You're* going to have what you've always wanted!"

Tony stared at her, uncomprehending.

"Why . . . what do *I* get?"

"A musical career. Your mother just told me so. And she said I could tell you. Oh, Tony, if only you'd known before! But it's not too late! Only . . . you'll have to work like anything if you're going to the College. . . ."



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### TESTING TIME

"I'll never, never be ready to catch that train!" wailed Linda, flying about the house in a wild rush which proclaimed her nervy state.

The whole family was dancing attendance, Mandy brushing her coat, while Mr. Carrell cleaned her shoes and Jill ran errands. Mrs. Carrell said soothingly:

"Do try and eat some breakfast, dear. There's plenty of time."

"There isn't. I must just run through the Phantasy Pieces again. I played them so dreadfully badly yesterday. Oh dear, I do feel sort of sick . . ."

"Listen," said Mrs. Carrell firmly. "You'll do no clarinet practise this morning. It will be worse than useless. Now drink a cup of tea and eat a piece of toast, there's a good girl. Fine thing if you fainted from hunger in the middle of the exam!"

Linda smiled wanly and sank into a chair. As she nibbled the toast her eyes watched the clock as if frightened the time would slip away without her knowledge. If only she could have run through her pieces. . . . But perhaps her mother was right and it wouldn't make her feel any better.

"I wonder if Tony feels as awful as I do!" she remarked with a sigh. Behind her a voice said gloomily:

"A jolly sight worse I should think."

"Tony! I didn't hear you come. Oh, isn't it horrifying to think it's really the exam day!"

Tony grinned but his face wore a strained look. Yes, it *was* worse for him, Linda thought. She had known for months that she must prepare for this day, while he had been slacking until a few weeks ago. How dreadful if she got into the College and he didn't. She had a feeling that it was only the thing which would reconcile him to the news of his mother's engagement to Mr. Vernon; apart from a natural anxiety to begin his musical career.

She pushed back her chair abruptly and stood up, pushing her arms into the coat Mandy held out for her.

"Here's your music case. . . ."

"And your instruments. . . ."

"Have you a clean hankie?"

The family hovered over them anxiously. Linda hugged them all and waved a hand.

"Good-bye. . . ."

"Good luck, Linda! Good luck, Tony!"

They were off at last. Linda sat back in the corner seat of the train and groaned softly.

"I wish it was all over. I wish it was this evening. . . ."

"I don't. I shall know then what a mess I've made

of it." Tony's voice was still depressed and Linda rallied him with a cheerfulness she did not really feel.

"What nonsense! Any idiot can tell you've . . . that you've got special talent."

Tony gave her a wry look and they sat silent, their minds going over their test pieces in imagination. Arriving at Victoria they took the bus to Kensington and got off opposite the Albert Memorial where they skirted the Albert Hall and approached the College of Music which lay directly behind it.

At the foot of the steps Linda stopped abruptly. Tony looked at her in some concern.

"I say, are you all right? You've gone awfully pale."

Linda smiled faintly but her lip was trembling.

"I . . . I've forgotten my donkey shoe . . ." she said miserably. "You know, the mascot Mandy brought me from Cornwall. It might have brought me luck."

"Great heavens, Lin! As if that could possibly make any difference!" Tony exclaimed robustly.

"It couldn't, could it," Linda's tone was flat. Tony was right, of course, but all the same she wished she hadn't forgotten. All through the exams at school she had worn the charm round her neck under her blouse and she had passed in seven subjects which was more than she had hoped for in her rosier dreams.

They went into the building. Linda knew it a little for she had been to one of the students' concerts in the big hall at the foot of the steps leading from the entrance hall. The glass doors were closed now and the hall was empty. Only those taking organ would need to venture there today.

Linda nodded rather forlornly to Tony and followed

some other girls into the cloakroom to take off her hat and coat. Her hands felt damp and clammy and she rinsed them under the tap, only to find them in the same condition a moment later. Coming up the stairs again into the entrance hall she heard her name called softly, and turned with a start. It was Mandy. She ran forward and pressed something into Linda's hand.

"It's the donkey shoe mascot," she said hurriedly. "There was such a scene when you'd gone. Jill found it on the dressing-table and was quite convinced you'd fail without it. She cried and cried until I promised to bring it, and I caught the next train. . . ."

"Oh, Mandy, *thank* you! I did sort of hate it when I realized . . . poor old Jill! Do give her my love and say how pleased I was."

"You just can't fail now," said Mandy firmly. She gave Linda a little push. "Go on, quickly, there's Tony beckoning you. They're going in."

"Good-bye, Mandy, and thanks again . . . awfully," Linda followed the little crowd of people going into a large room on the ground floor. Tony had kept a seat next to him and they exchanged a despairing look and a resigned shrug as the papers were given out.

With one hand Linda felt for the donkey shoe mascot now reposing round her neck under her silk blouse. With the other she took the paper and glanced at it swiftly, remembering her father's counsel which had stood her in good stead in her previous examinations.

"Don't waste time over questions you are doubtful about," he had told her again and again. "Tackle the ones you can answer first, then maybe if there's time you'll be able to put up some sort of show on the rest."

Some of the questions looked incredibly difficult. Forcing down the panic which threatened, Linda

decided that she could at least have a try at the second question. Soon her dark head was bent over the paper and her pen scratching swiftly to keep pace with her thoughts. From time to time a candidate would be called out and he or she would disappear into another room, there to perform, Linda knew, on their chosen instruments before two or three examiners.

She tried to forget her own turn and when the call came she was so engrossed that her name had to be repeated.

She stood up, a little flustered, and glanced at Tony but his head was bent over his paper, his lips set. She picked up the case which held her clarinets and followed the messenger into a waiting room where the competitors were expected to warm up or tune their instruments.

Taking the A $\flat$  clarinet out of its case Linda held it closely under her arms for a few minutes to warm it. Then she lifted the mouthpiece to her lips and blew gently. Now she was ready. It was a relief when her summons came.

Entering the examination room she saw three men seated at a table. The one in the middle had a long mournful face and looked as if he was already bored with the proceedings and the one on the left had a fierce expression which made Linda feel he would have scant sympathy with nerves. But the round red face of the man on the right was kind and his eyes twinkled at her reassuringly through his glasses. He gave Linda a smiling nod as if to say: "You'll be all right, m'dear. Don't let these dry old fossils scare you. . . ."

Reassured, Linda lifted her clarinet to her lips again and began the Schumann piece she had selected with Clare Truett's help. It was more difficult than the

Mozart Concerto which she would play next, but you were supposed to choose two which contrasted.

She got through the clarinet pieces without mishap though directly she had finished she felt she could have played so much better. There was silence while the three men scribbled on the papers before them and exchanged a whispered word or two.

Then the one on the left indicated the grand piano with a rather curt nod of his head and Linda seated herself on the stool. A kind of icy calm came over her. This was the dreaded exam at last, but she had worked hard and now could only do her best. She lifted her hands and began the Chopin Étude. . . .

It was over. As she walked along the corridor and back to the room where she must continue the written paper Linda was not surprised to find that her knees were shaking. Tony looked up as she took her place again and in response to the lifted enquiry of his eyebrows she gave a small shrug of her slight shoulders. It was over. Farther than that she dare not think. Her head bent again over her paper and she did not even notice when Tony left for his own ordeal.

At the end of the three hours the papers were collected and they went down to the canteen. Tony found two places at a table and asked almost curtly:

"What do you want to eat?"

"Anything . . . oh yes, welsh rarebit and coffee will do, thanks."

She watched his tall, angular figure cross the room to the counter, the thin nervous hand making the familiar gesture to flick back the lock of fair hair. The expression on his face was gloomy and she knew that he felt he had done badly. Oh, it would be too awful if Tony failed now to get a place at the College! Almost

worse than it would be for herself. Through her blouse Linda superstitiously touched the donkey shoe mascot and whispered:

"Good luck for Tony, too . . . *please* . . .!"

A girl across the table was looking at her. Linda coloured and put her hand hastily into her lap. How silly to think a brass charm could make any difference, one way or the other. It would be strictly on merit that she or Tony would pass . . . or fail.

He came back to the table, carefully balancing the tray. Linda said cheerfully:

"How did you get on?"

"Rottenly. Muffed all the runs in the Bach and made a mess of the Chaconne. The only thing I played at all decently was the Svendsen Romance and that didn't need technique."

"Oh, Tony . . . !" Linda was silent for a minute, depressed by this picture of failure that Tony had painted. Then she said hopefully, "I don't expect it was half as bad as you thought."

Tony shrugged his shoulders.

"What about you?"

"Oh . . . I don't know. I felt I could have played better and those three men were so frightening. At least two of them were. The other one grinned at me just as I was going to crawl out on my hands and knees."

Tony gave an unwilling smile.

"The stout old boy with the red face."

Linda nodded.

"Yes. Well, anyway it's over. That's something. Now I suppose we wait. About a week Martin told you, didn't he? I wish we could go to sleep until the results come through."

"And afterwards . . ." suggested Tony with a groan. "At least, I expect you'll get a place all right."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" exclaimed Linda exasperatedly, "What's the good of *expecting* failure? Besides," she grinned, "I've wished on the donkey shoe for you. Did you know Mandy came all the way up here with it and caught me just before I went into the examination room?"

"She didn't . . . !"

"I thought perhaps you saw her. It was Jill's idea really. She found it just after I'd gone and cried until Mandy said she'd bring it."

Linda giggled. Not for worlds would she let Tony know that she had felt fortified by the feel of the charm round her neck; that she had in truth wished on it for him. . . .

Tony was looking down at his plate, his thoughts now obviously far away. Linda suddenly wondered if he was thinking about Mandy. She had been rather offhand with him of late. In fact . . . now Linda came to think about it . . . Mandy was different altogether, these days. Nicer and more thoughtful in some respects but less gay . . . and sort of absent-minded and dreamy. Had she something on her mind? Could she and Tony have quarrelled seriously?

Tony suddenly looked up.

"If you've finished, let's go," he said abruptly.

They got their outdoor things and then almost in silence went up the stairs to the entrance hall again. The doorman smiled at them from his box in a friendly manner as they pushed open the glass doors and went out into the street.

Glancing back at the big building with its many windows overlooking the back of the Albert Hall—that

goal of so many of the students who perfected their art behind its walls—Linda and Tony were both thinking the same thing.

Would this great place be their own daily destination in the autumn? Their own training ground for the life they both wished to follow?





## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### MANDY AGAIN

IT WAS very hot in the house. Mandy threw open the french doors into the garden and wandered outside, feeling restless and a little strange; almost as though there was a sort of unhappiness buried deep down inside her; so deep that she was not quite sure what it was, herself. It certainly was not because she was alone except for Jill who was upstairs in bed, asleep. Solitude, in fact, suited her mood.

Dusk was falling and the smell of the night-scented stock and the tobacco plants rose sweet and heady from the borders. Mandy sank on to the seat of Jill's swing and drifted slowly back and forth, wondering why she should be so specially alive to the beauty of this summer evening.

From the house came the shrill peal of the door-bell

and she gave a faint sigh of exasperation. Surely that couldn't be the others home already! No, it must be someone else for her mother and father had taken Linda to the pictures after the ordeal of the exam and the programme would not be over until after ten.

For a minute Mandy was tempted to let the door-bell ring on but she realized that any of their friends would know that they wouldn't all be out together. They never left Jill in the house alone at night.

She went through the hall and opened the door. It was Martin Grant, tall and good-looking in a dark blue blazer and grey flannels, a white tennis shirt throwing into contrast his deeply bronzed skin. The colour rose to Mandy's face in a swift becoming flush and her heart began to race in a foolish manner. Striving for control she said shakily:

"Oh . . . hallo . . . Mummy and Dad have taken Linda to the cinema. I . . . I think they thought it would take her mind off the exam."

Martin said gravely:

"I've been in to Tony's and thought I'd just see how Linda got on."

"Oh . . . well, she said she'd failed, of course, but we don't take much notice of that." Mandy paused and remembered her manners. "But do come in, won't you? They'll be home quite soon, I'm sure."

"Thank you."

Martin followed her into the lounge. Mandy suddenly felt panic-stricken. If only someone else would come! Or the others get home earlier than she expected. She couldn't think of anything to say; not anything worth saying to this man who was so often in her thoughts these days. She supposed she would grow out of such stupidity. The silence began to get on her nerves and

she wished the ground would open and swallow her up before his eyes.

"Could . . . could I get you some coffee?"

That was it. Action. Something to do. But he said pleasantly:

"No thank you. As a matter of fact I had some just before I came out."

She stood beside the bowl of roses, altering their arrangement with nervous fingers.

"They're lovely, aren't they. . . ."

"And you look so lovely beside them. . . ."

Martin's voice came softly across the room and Mandy looked up, startled, wondering if she could have dreamed the words. There was a look in Martin's eyes that she had not seen before. Oh, why did he say things like that and look at her so if he didn't . . . he didn't . . .

Tears filled her own eyes suddenly and she turned her head away swiftly. In two strides Martin was across the room, his arm about her slim waist.

"Mandy, darling, why are you crying . . . ?"

"I'm not . . . I'm not . . ." she protested and sniffed childishly, feeling the foolish tears on her cheeks. Oh, it wasn't fair to catch her out like this. She twisted in his arms. "Please . . ."

"Mandy, dear lovely little Mandy, how can I help telling you that I love you . . . ?"

She stared at him, forcing back the tide of happiness that seemed to rush upwards from her heart. Of course it wasn't true, she mustn't believe it. And yet . . . his eyes seemed to be telling her that it was the truth.

"But Clare . . . what about Clare?" she whispered fearfully.

For a moment he looked bewildered. Then his expression cleared and he laughed softly.

"Dear silly one, how could you think . . . ? Why, Clare and I are the greatest friends but she gave her heart away nearly a year ago to a pal of mine who is abroad touring with an orchestra. I promised to look after Clare for him until he could get home and speak to her parents, but by heaven, John would have had to come back and look after his own girl if I'd guessed people would be coupling me with her. Look at me, Mandy. Tell me you can learn to love me a little. . . . That you'll marry me one day. . . ."

His lips were against her cheek and very near her mouth.

"But I won't be able to marry for ages. Daddy wouldn't even let me be engaged," she said breathlessly.

"Then we'll wait. But give me something to hope on so that I know some other fellow won't be whisking you away. . . ."

Suddenly shy, Mandy turned her head into his shoulder and sniffed the weedy tobacco-mixture.

"I . . . I love the smell of your coat," she said inconsequently.

Now his hand was under her chin, gently forcing her to look at him. Then he kissed her on the mouth. It was a quiet, tender kiss that seemed to express the deep abiding sort of love. She felt much older in that moment; as if she had begun to realize a little what real love can mean for two people who felt that way about each other. And there was a sort of pain behind the happiness because of the knowledge that she would never be quite the same again.

And then the front door opened to the sound of voices and Mandy drew away from Martin swiftly in a panic of confusion. What would they say; her mother and

father, Linda . . . ? She felt she could not meet the questions, the exclamations . . . the obstacles they might put up.

But when she would have run away, Martin caught at her hand and held it firmly in his own large and comforting clasp. And they stood there together, hand in hand, to face the others as they came into the room.

Behind her mother and father, Linda stared at her sister. It seemed to her that Mandy had never looked lovelier than she did now with that faint pink flush on her cheeks, her blue eyes shining with happiness. Even if Martin hadn't been telling her father that he loved Mandy and wanted to marry her, she would have guessed the news from the expression on their faces. Dad was saying that Mandy was too young, but Mummy was kissing her as if it was already settled. Mr. Carrell took Martin off to the other room to talk to him and Mrs. Carrell, after hugging Mandy again, bustled into the kitchen.

The two sisters were left alone. To Linda it seemed that Mandy had suddenly gone right beyond her. It made her feel almost shy.

"I . . . I do hope you'll be very happy," she said hesitantly, but Mandy ran across the room and hugged Linda with an almost desperate warmth.

"Don't sound so . . . so sort of awed. It's me, just the same, Lin. Nothing's changed and I don't suppose we'll be getting married for ages. Oh, Linda, I'm so happy. You don't know. But you will. You wait . . ."

"I'm waiting . . ." said Linda with a comical grimace and they went off into a fit of giggles at the familiar remark.

And now Dad was back with Martin, one arm round his shoulders and obviously feeling genial and satisfied.

"Look at her!" he said, pointing at Mandy. "An absolute baby! Ten years' engagement at the very least!"

"Oh, Dad, I'll be twenty-nine!" pouted Mandy and he patted her hand reassuringly.

"All right then, five . . ." he said and grinned. "Come on, folks, here's Mother with the coffee. I hope she's found us something to eat as well. This news has made me hungry."

It was a gay little company but it was not long before Linda slipped away. With a pang in her heart she had remembered Tony. Had he seen this coming? Or would it be a blow to him? If so, the news must not come upon him suddenly, given perhaps by his mother who would be sure to make a sentimental monologue about it. But if Linda was to prevent this, she must be quick about it.

She went into the garden and looked up at the house next door. Tony's bedroom window was a lighted square in the darkness. She called softly and flung a handful of soil at the glass. The curtains drew back and Tony's face peered out. Linda called up to him:

"Tony . . . are you undressed? Well, come down. I've got something to tell you."

"All right." He nodded and withdrew.

Linda called after him:

"Don't knock. Come round to the side gate."

A minute later they were standing together in the garden. Linda was glad of the darkness. She took a deep breath. Was it kinder to take a quick plunge or probe slowly? She chose the former way.

"Mandy's engaged to Martin Grant," she said abruptly.

She braced herself for she knew not what. But only a

low whistle sounded through the darkness and Tony exclaimed delightedly:

"By jove, you don't say . . . ! When did all this happen?"

"Just now. Or at least, this evening, when Dad and Mummy and I were at the pictures. Oh, Tony, don't you mind dreadfully?"

The dark shape of Tony turned towards her. She could not see his expression but his voice sounded genuine enough in its surprise.

"Me . . . mind . . . ? Why ever should I? Oh, you mean because I had a sort of crush on Mandy once. Maybe it's because this has been brewing but you know, Lin," she could hear the laughter in his voice, "I've felt for some time that Mandy's too old for me."

"Tony . . . ! Why you're almost the same age. Only a few months younger anyway. . . ."

"Yes. But it happens to girls. Especially at this stage. They just seem to rush by boys, in age."

"I suppose so . . ." Linda's tone was doubtful, even a trifle depressed. Tony laughed again and putting his arm round her shoulders gave her a quick hug.

"Poor old Lin! I believe you've had romantic pictures of my youth blighted by unrequited love!"

"Tony . . . you're horrid. I haven't."

The arm round her shoulders tightened again. Tony bent forward and she felt his quick kiss on her cheek.

"Dear Lin! You're such a good little pal. Don't you grow up too quickly, will you. . . ."

Then he was gone. Linda stayed for a minute or two longer in the cool darkness and then went into the house. Martin had gone and Mandy was just going up to bed. They met in the hall. Mandy had still an aura

about her, her happiness showing through so clearly that again Linda felt almost embarrassed. But it was the same old Mandy who caught her arm and whispered:

"Come into my room as you come up, won't you?"

She nodded and a few minutes later joined her sister. She sat on the bed while Mandy brushed out her golden hair and talked in an excited breathless voice about the evening's events.

"I never even dreamed he liked me . . . particularly. I thought it was Clare. You did, too, didn't you? I thought Dad would make an awful fuss about me being engaged but he hasn't. I guess he thinks I don't look much like being a career girl so that it doesn't matter as much," Mandy giggled. "Of course we won't be able to get married for ages, he says, but Martin thinks he'll wear him down to a two years' engagement. I'll be twenty-one. Heaps of girls get married before that. Martin's going to buy the ring as soon as he can and we're going to throw an engagement party early next week. And oh, Linda, I'm so frightened inside when I remember that I don't know a thing about music. You'll have to help me. *Do* you think it matters . . . ?"

And so it went on until at last Mrs. Carrell put her head round the bedroom door and said smilingly:

"For goodness' sake let Linda get to bed, Mandy darling. You should be getting your beauty sleep, both of you."

Linda slid off the bed and yawned.

"I guess that's true enough for me, anyway. Mandy doesn't need it."

Mandy poised before the glass, a lovely golden-haired little figure in a blue-flowered housecoat.

"Oh, but I *do* . . ." she said earnestly, peering at her

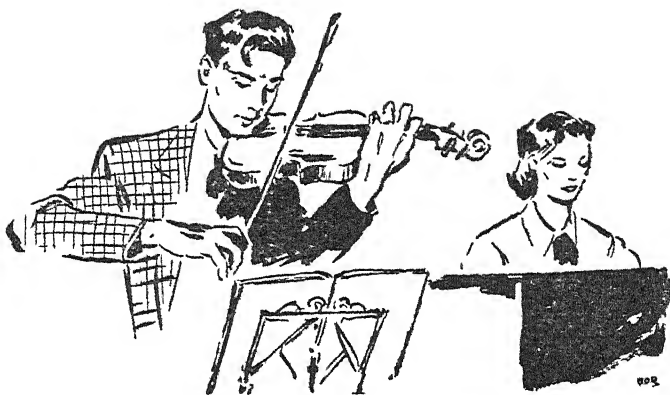
reflection with a dissatisfied expression. "Especially now. Sometimes I look positively hideous after a late night."

"I believe she actually means it," Linda nodded at her mother and grinned. "Well anyway, good night, ugly one. And . . . and you do know I'm terribly glad for you, don't you."

Linda went into her own room and undressed slowly in the dim light she used for Jill's sake. What a long, long time it seemed since the ordeal of the morning!

Resolutely she turned her thoughts away from the chances of failure for either of them and visualized instead a happy prospect of Tony and she going to and fro daily to the College of Music.

As she jumped into bed and turned off the light she remembered suddenly the little scene in the garden. She felt the colour come into her cheeks and was glad there was no one there to see.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### PLAY ON . . .

"THERE'S the postman now . . . !" Linda jumped up, then sat down again, her face pale and tense. "I have a feeling this is it. You go, Jilly."

Jill slipped from her chair and ran into the hall, returning to the breakfast-table with a small handful of letters.

"One for you, Dad. Looks like a bill. And here's another. One for you, Mummy——"

"For heaven's sake !" exclaimed Linda despairingly. "Isn't there one for *me*?"

Jill gave an impish grin and produced another envelope from behind her back. Linda snatched the letter from her and clutched it to her with a dramatic expression.

"I . . . I daren't open it."

"Let me," offered Mandy.

"No, I will." Linda pressed her lips together and with the whole family watching her anxiously, slowly tore open the flap. Her eyes scanned the brief lines, then she let the paper fall into her lap with a great sigh. Mandy said quickly:

"Don't mind too much, Linda. Don't——"

Linda laughed shakily.

"But I'm in. I've got a place at the College . . ."

They fell upon her with their congratulations, hugging and kissing her. Mandy was laughing.

"Honestly, I thought by the look on your face that it was all over."

"I just couldn't believe it. . . ."

Linda fell back into her chair limply, feeling the reaction after the tense waiting through the past week. Then she said anxiously:

"Did you see the postman go to the Ryans' house, Jill?"

"Yes, he did."

"Then I expect Tony has heard as well. I hope he'll soon come in to tell us." Linda moved restlessly to the window.

"Why don't you go and ask him?" suggested Mandy, but Linda shook her head.

"I daren't. Just supposing . . . Oh dear, I do hope it's all right . . ." She glanced out of the window again then wandered back to the table. "It's silly to worry yet. It's awfully early. . . ."

"Linda . . ." said Mandy suddenly, "do you think we've ordered enough ice cream?"

For a moment Linda looked startled. What on earth had ice cream to do with Tony hearing about the exam? Then she remembered. It was an important day for

Mandy, too. An engagement party doesn't happen every day in a girl's life and this evening their house would be crammed to capacity with friends come to congratulate Mandy and Martin.

For the rest of the morning Linda tried to concentrate on the preparations for the party. Every now and then her delight at winning a place at the College would bubble to the surface making her burst into song, or seize Mandy round the waist in a mad whirling dance. And then the secret fear that Tony had failed would grip her again and quench her gaiety. Surely if he had received good news he would have been in to tell her? Or was he just as afraid to speak in case she had been the one to be disappointed? Time and again Linda was on the point of going next door, but could not find the courage.

And then in the late afternoon Tony called. He put his head round the door of the kitchen where Linda was topping trifles with blobs of cream while Jill, with a serious face, balanced glacé cherries on the blobs.

"Hullo! Any help wanted? Furniture removing? Or sampling . . . ?" Tony grinned at them engagingly and put out a finger towards the bowl of whipped-cream. Linda slapped his hand and frowned.

"Don't you dare! Yes, we'll want the chairs from the bedrooms. And Mummy thought your mother might lend us your pouffés."

"Right. I'll get the chairs first," Tony said briskly and made for the stairs. Linda stared after him with a puzzled expression. He couldn't have had bad news or he wouldn't be so cheerful. Perhaps they didn't write at all if one had been unsuccessful. She had forgotten to ask that. . . . When he came back she must tell him about herself. Why had she so stupidly put it off?

But when Tony came back into the kitchen it was Jill who said complacently:

"Linda's going to the College. She got a letter. . . ."

Tony threw Linda a startled look.

"Why ever didn't you tell me?" he demanded almost accusingly.

"Because . . . because I didn't want to brag if you hadn't got a place," faltered Linda, colouring.

"Oh . . . well, congratulations, kid. You jolly well deserved it." Tony's voice was hearty and he gave Linda's arm a little squeeze and smiled down at her. She said uncomfortably:

"But you . . . you haven't heard?"

Tony shook his head.

"Not a word. But for heaven's sake, don't let that worry you." He was doing his very best, Linda knew, but it wasn't long before he drifted to the door with the careless remark thrown over his shoulder:

"Well, there doesn't seem anything more I can do here at the moment, so I'll be getting along. See you at the party. . . ."

As he strode through the hall, Mandy called down the stairs:

"Come early, Tony. I'll need some help with the boys."

He waved vaguely and a moment later the front door banged behind him.

So Linda had been given a place at the College. Well, she deserved it, as he had told her. As for himself, obviously he'd "had it" as they say. So it would be the Bank after all.

Tony paused in front of his own house. He had been so preoccupied that he had not noticed before the great black car standing at the gate. That meant that Mr.

Vernon was there visiting his mother. And perhaps Johnny would be there, too. No, he could not go in and meet them; especially Johnny whom he had avoided since hearing his mother's news.

Turning on his heel abruptly, Tony strode up the road, his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets as he brooded on the dismal future that lay before him.

He had not gone far when he heard someone shout his name and turning his head he saw the big car drawing in to the kerb alongside him. He scowled at Johnny who was at the wheel and alone.

"Well . . . ?" he said stiffly.

"Give you a lift some place, sir?" Johnny grinned and touched his cap.

"I'm not going anywhere in particular," Tony said ungraciously, but his eyes slid over the great car enviously. Fancy driving a bus like that!

"I'm just going back to the house to put on a clean shirt for the party," Johnny volunteered. "Dad's all ready so I've left the love-birds together. Why not come along with me and we could go back to Mandy's together."

There seemed no reason for refusal. In any case it would be something to do; take his mind off things. Tony slid into the seat beside Johnny and watched his hands manipulate the wheel expertly

"Like to take over?" asked Johnny carelessly.

"Better not. No licence," Tony's voice was gruff. Johnny grinned and gave him a searching glance.

"Something eating you?"

"Yes . . ." growled Tony.

"Me . . . by any chance?" Johnny's look was direct.

"Listen, I don't want to get in your hair or anything . . ."

"It's nothing to do with you . . ." Tony paused, then went on impulsively: "Linda heard from the College this morning. She's got a place. There's been nothing for me so I suppose I'm out."

"'R' is further down the alphabet than 'C'," Johnny pointed out. "They'd be mugs to turn you down . . . absolute mugs. Bags of talent and all that."

It might be the reason he hadn't heard. It was extraordinary how comforted Tony felt. Perhaps Johnny wasn't such a bad chap after all. He said awkwardly:

"Well, thanks anyway. . . ."

Johnny went on carelessly:

"Now . . . me. I've had a go at several things but I've no talent for any of them apparently. Anyway, people have been pretty rude." He grinned cheerfully. "So I've decided to go in with the old man after all. It's what he's always wanted, and as Linda was saying the other day, it might be that business is my pigeon. . . ."

"*Linda* was telling you that?" Tony said incredulously. Since when had Linda been friendly enough with Johnny to give advice? He was almost on the point of disliking Johnny again when he continued cheerfully:

"Yes, she was put up to it by Dad, I guess. Don't think I cut much ice with her personally. So, there you are, I'm going to have a shot at it."

Tony looked thoughtful.

"Mum used to be on at me about a business life and now she's given in and said I can take up music, I feel I must go on, even if I haven't won a place at the College. But I don't know what she'll say if . . ."

He stopped and Johnny said:

"It'll be all right. Your mother thinks you're tops, anyway. You know, you're a lucky chap. I . . . I never knew my own mother——" Johnny broke off as if

regretting his burst of sentiment and went on quickly: "Bit of a scream, the love-birds, aren't they. Still it's nice to see them happy and it'll keep their minds off us chaps a bit. I say, Tony, Dad's talking about getting us a second-hand bus of our own to run about in. Bit of all right if it comes off, eh? Look, here we are. Make yourself at home while I change. I shan't be two ticks."

Left alone, Tony gazed round the big well-furnished room and realized that soon this house would be his home. Well, it was a fine place and there was nothing showy or vulgar about it, even though it showed everywhere the evidence of plenty. He strolled across to the magnificent Bechstein grand in the corner and tried it diffidently and for the first time it seemed to him not a bad thing that the four of them were going to link their lives together. Johnny wasn't a bad chap at all when you got to know him and maybe it would be quite fun having a father and a brother. If only . . . if only he could have won a place at the College. . . .

Johnny came downstairs then and they went back together to his own home. Johnny sat on Tony's bed while he changed and suddenly there was a knock on the bedroom door and Mrs. Ryan called:

"Tony . . . there's a letter just come through the door for you. Apparently it's been across the road to twenty-six. It's a very badly made five. They must have brought it over . . ."

Tony had thrown open the door and now he almost snatched the letter from his mother's hand and tore it open. He read through the brief phrases and gave a triumphant whoop.

"I've got a place at the College!"

"What did I tell you?" said Johnny laconically, looking up with a grin. "Congrats, old chap."

"Listen, d'you mind? I must go and tell Lin! I'll be back."

Tony pelted down the stairs and burst into the house next door.

"Linda . . . ? She's dressing," said Jill, spreading blue taffeta skirts complacently.

"Well, tell her she's got to come down at once," ordered Tony in a masterful fashion. "I've something to tell her."

But Linda had already heard his voice and now she came running down the stairs. She was wearing a new scarlet dress, designed by herself and made by her mother. It had a narrow fitted bodice and a very wide skirt; the wide, heart-shaped neck cut low, with full, bunched sleeves. Her black hair, smooth and shining, fell almost to her shoulders, contrasting with the whiteness of her neck and throat. Her eyes looked very large and dark under the straight fringe.

For a moment Tony almost forgot what he had come for. Somehow he had never realized before how attractive Linda was. He said unsteadily:

"Gosh . . . you do look pretty, Lin!"

Linda could feel her colour rising. She said quickly:

"Did . . . did you want me, Tony?"

Tony flourished the letter under her nose.

"It went to twenty-six. The mutts can't make a five, for some reason. But it's all right. We're both in. . . ."

"Oh, Tony . . . !" Linda's eyes were shining. Now it was all right. Now she could enjoy Mandy's party and help to make it the best ever. But there just weren't any words really to express what she felt and she said again breathlessly, "Oh, Tony . . . !"

He laughed and swung her up to him in a bear-like hug as the strains of a waltz came to them from the

lounge where Mandy was trying out the radiogram. They whirled round and round giddily, crazily, with Linda's wide skirt making a scarlet umbrella. And then suddenly Mandy brushed past them accusingly.

"It's *Martin*! Didn't you hear him knock?"

Almost guiltily they broke away and fled into the lounge where Tony seated himself on the piano stool and struck up gaily, "Here comes the bride . . ." as Mandy, looking happy and excited, entered the room clinging to Martin's arm.

"Gosh, I've left Johnny sitting on my bed! I'd better collect him. I'll be back." Tony jumped up and made for the door and Linda felt happier than ever. Yes, everything had come right for Tony. Now she could relax.

And soon everyone was there. Everyone that mattered, as Linda put it to herself, gazing round the room. Her own mother and father, happy and proud, Mrs. Ryan and Mr. Vernon, old Miss Hallam . . . And the younger people. Martin and Mandy and their special friends; her own . . .

"Here's to the happy couple. My daughter, Mandy, and Martin Grant . . . a very good fellow and one I'm proud to welcome as a future son-in-law. Let's drink to their future. . . ."

Mr. Carrell lifted his glass and they drank to the newly-engaged pair. Then Mr. Carrell lifted his glass again.

"Now we have to congratulate two other young people. To Tony and Linda who have both won places to the Royal College of Music. Here's to their continued success. . . . And while we're clearing away the tables, shall we ask them to give us a chance to hear them before they become famous?"

"Oh, Dad . . . !" said Linda, backing towards the door and looking shy.

But the company would brook no refusal and Linda at last whispered to Tony:

"You brought your violin, didn't you? You play something and I'll accompany you. Please . . . I'd rather it was that way. Play the Svendsen Romance . . ."

As Linda listened to the lovely sound of Tony's violin and blended her playing with his the thoughts drifted through her head happily.

She was going to do what she had always wanted to do; she was going to study music. And not alone. She and Tony would be going to and fro to the College together. Together they would learn and discuss, practise and argue, and music would be their life.

And out of it all would come their future. No one knew yet just what that would be. But that it would be something wonderful; something worth working for and waiting for. Of that Linda was confident. She looked up at Tony and they exchanged a smile.

It was Mandy's evening, and Martin's. But this was *their* moment. . . .

THE END





